1
HELL MODE
The Hardcore Gamer Dominates in Another World with Garbage Balancing
STORY HAMUO
ART MO

Table of Contents

Cover
Prologue
Chapter 1: I Reincarnated as a Serf
Chapter 2: First Summon
Chapter 3: Krena and Playing Knight
Chapter 4: The Appraisal Ceremony
Chapter 5: Krena vs. Vice-Captain of the Knights
Chapter 6: Incident
Chapter 7: Allen’s Resolve
Chapter 8: Hunting Albaherons
Chapter 9: Dogora, Son of the Weapons Merchant
Chapter 10: Great Boar Hunting
Chapter 11: Rank E Summons
Chapter 12: The Feudal Lord’s Visit
Chapter 13: Setting Off
Side Story: Lakeside
Afterword
Color Illustrations
Bonus Short Stories
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

Prologue
Chapter 1: I Reincarnated as a Serf
Chapter 2: First Summon
Chapter 3: Krena and Playing Knight
Chapter 4: The Appraisal Ceremony
Chapter 5: Krena vs. Vice-Captain of the Knights
Chapter 6: Incident
Chapter 7: Allen's Resolve
Chapter 8: Hunting Albaherons
Chapter 9: Dogora, Son of the Weapons Merchant
Chapter 10: Great Boar Hunting
Chapter 11: Rank E Summons
Chapter 12: The Feudal Lord's Visit
Chapter 13: Setting Off
Side Story: Lakeside
Afterword

Prologue

The man’s name was Yamada Kenichi. He was a thirty-five-year-old office worker, and he was single.

“It’s actually over? After only three years of service?” he murmured forlornly from within his 142-square-foot studio apartment. Despite it being daytime on a Saturday, Kenichi was at home. He was blankly staring at his computer screen, which currently displayed a fantasy landscape with “FIN” written in fancy letters in the bottom right corner. It appeared to be an online game, with numerous characters expressing their farewells in varying words and gestures.

“Man, that was just another game on easy mode. Like, the easiest of all easy modes. It’s probably best that it ended. Saves me from wasting any more time and money on it.”

Despite having spent much of his salary and bonus rolling for loot boxes and purchasing in-game items, Kenichi did not feel all that sad about the game ending. After all, during the three years since its launch, he had been rather dissatisfied with its simplistic story and low level of difficulty. The only thing that had kept him playing was the hope of it one day receiving an update that would add more engaging content.

But alas, reality was cruel. Perhaps it was due to stagnant player base growth. Or maybe it was something else. Regardless, the company servicing the game had announced that they were shutting it down.

“Hm? What’s this, they’re launching a new game?”

When Kenichi quit the game and checked the company’s site, he found a link to what seemed to be a page introducing a new title that they were releasing. He clicked on it.

“Let’s s— Huh?” Kenichi’s jaw dropped as he read the despair-inducing text that appeared.

```
- Your character will level up even while you’re offline!
- Reset your class anytime you want!
- The AI will take care of all the battling for you!
- Join now, and receive three loot boxes with a 100% chance of obtaining legendary items!
```

“Another hopelessly easy game. No, this isn’t even a game on easy mode—at this point, it’s just an AFK game. Since when have they sunk this low…” Kenichi covered his face with both hands and thought back to the titles from the golden age of gaming.

Back when he had discovered his first online game twenty years ago, leveling up was so difficult that taking a month to raise one level was considered normal. He could still remember the sense of achievement that

he felt when he was finally able to promote his character to an advanced class after grinding for six whole months.

Every time his character died, he would drop all his equipment and lose twenty percent of his accrued experience. Boss monsters had such ridiculously large health pools that fighting them required fifty-player raid parties to dedicate at least an hour—some fights had even taken three whole hours. Kenichi had kept spare keyboards around because he kept breaking them from spamming the keys so much. And in spite of all that, the boss would only drop a single item, which meant that all fifty players would then have to fight each other in a battle royale right after the raid.

It was precisely because the game design was so unreasonable and unforgiving that the items and levels Kenichi gained actually meant something to him. He had poured tens of thousands of hours of sheer passion into this game, but it had ended service more than ten years ago.

Since then, Kenichi had tried multiple games, always seeking to relive the rush from back then. However, the times had changed, and players nowadays were no longer interested in games with intensive time commitments. As a result, both the major and indie game companies had shifted focus to making games as easy and accessible as possible. In those, leveling up was a piece of cake, and everything from weapons and equipment to skills was easily obtainable.

“Guess I’ll look elsewhere, then.”

Giving up on this game company, Kenichi went online to search for more of a challenge. He typed “game hell mode challenging” into the search engine then pressed Enter. To his surprise, the top result was not a game company’s website or even a game’s introduction site.

“What the—?! Let’s see… ‘You are invited to a game that will never end.’”

The on-screen text definitely grabbed Kenichi’s attention with promises of so much content that no single player could ever accomplish everything the game had to offer. His interest piqued, Kenichi decided to give the game a whirl.

“Hmm, so it’s a medieval-style world with swords and magic. Well, I guess it wouldn’t hurt to give it a try. Hold on, what’s this? I set up my preferences on the website itself?”

As it turned out, before downloading the game, he needed to confirm some settings in the browser window. He started going through the fields.

“First, difficulty. There’s Easy Mode at the bottom, then Normal, Extra, and Hell. Not that I’m going to choose Easy, of course.”

Apparently, players could choose what difficulty level they wanted to play this game at. There were even explanations for each mode.

Easy Mode

Gaining and leveling up skills will be 10 times faster than in Normal Mode.
You will have the opportunity to roll for three Extra Skills.
This mode is best for players new to gaming or those who dislike level grinding.
Normal Mode
This is the standard difficulty.
You will have the opportunity to roll for one Extra Skill.
This is the most popular mode and will allow for a limited amount of character development.
Select this mode if you are unsure which one to go with.
Extra Mode
Gaining and leveling up skills will take 10 times longer than on Normal Mode.
In exchange, you will be able to develop your character more than in Normal Mode.
You will have the opportunity to roll for one Normal Skill.
This mode is best for players familiar with gaming who find Normal Mode too easy to be enjoyable.
Hell Mode
Gaining and leveling up skills will take 100 times longer than on Normal Mode.
There is no limit to how far you can develop your character.
The only skills you start out with are the ones tied to your class—you will not be offered an opportunity to roll for skills.
You may come to regret choosing this mode, but there will be no turning back. However, should you manage to overcome that despair, you will undoubtedly learn a Principle of the World.
This mode was created by the developers for fun.

So, the higher the difficulty, the more difficult it'll be to obtain new skills and level up. On the flip side, the higher the potential growth ceiling.

"Hell Mode, obviously," Kenichi muttered with zero hesitation. "Next is...class."

The following screen was for class selection. The MMO staples were all present: Swordsman, Fighter, Thief, Merchant, Mage, Sage, Sword Lord, Saintess, Archwizard. Each class also had a difficulty setting, and more details could be seen when clicking on each option.

"There're a lot of options. Looks like the further down the list, the harder it is to master. Oh wow, there's even Hero and Demon Lord classes."

As Kenichi continued scrolling down, he saw the displayed classes grow in rarity and strength. At the same time, they were also assigned stars that indicated how difficult it would be to become proficient in them: Swordsman

and Fighter both had only one star, Sword Lord and Archwizard both had three stars, Hero and Demon Lord had five stars, and so on and so forth.

"Hold on, if both Swordsman and Sword Lord are available, then it only makes sense to choose Sword Lord. What's the point of giving that option?" *Judging by the name, Sword Lord is a higher version of Swordsman, right? Why would anyone choose Swordsman, then?*

Kenichi decided to click on Swordsman just to see what would happen. The screen proceeded to display the available social classes.

"There's Commoner, Baron, and Count. Whoa, there's even King. Okay, so my character's social class gets randomly selected from these options. Is it different for Sword Lord?"

Quite a few of the social classes depicted in light novels about otherworlds came up in the list. Kenichi recognized the terms almost immediately, having read a few series in his day. He pressed Back to return to the class selection screen and chose Sword Lord this time.

"There's only Serf, Commoner, and Baron. I see, so the more powerful the job class, the lower the social class, which presumably will make it harder to level up."

Just to be sure, Kenichi checked out the Hero class. Sure enough, the social class was set up as a random roll between only Serf and Commoner. The possibility of getting each social class was clearly displayed, indicating that the more powerful the class chosen, the more likely it was for the character to start off at a lower social class. Kenichi caught on pretty quickly.

"Which one should I choose? I've already tried playing as a sword user and mage in other games. It might be fun being a healer this time. Oh, wait, but I've never played as a Demon Lord before. A Demon Lord starting off as a Serf sounds pretty interesting. Hold on, there's more?"

Still conflicted about which one to go with, Kenichi was about to choose what he thought was the option at the bottom of the list, Demon Lord, when he noticed that there was one more class positioned even lower.

"Summoner? Being a Summoner is even harder than Demon Lord?"

At the very bottom of the list of classes was Summoner, which was marked with eight stars. When Kenichi clicked on it, he found that the only associated social class was Serf.

"Summoner, huh. I've never really played as one before. Ooh, it'd be pretty cool if I could summon a divine dragon or something."

As an avid gamer, Kenichi had of course played console games as well. He now recalled a certain nationwide hit game in which he had been able to call forth summons based on Greek mythology.

"All right, Summoner it is. Social class is Serf. And of course, Hell Mode for the difficulty. Is that all the settings?"

Kenichi examined every corner of the interface, expecting at least a gender selection screen by way of character customization, but found

nothing. There was only the big “Launch Game” button smack-dab in the middle of the screen. With no other choice, he clicked on it.

<The Summoner class is still in testing and has no currently active users. Do you still wish to proceed? Yes / No>

“Huh? It’s still in testing? Then why’d you let me choose it? Hmm, but that sounds like it could be fun too. All right, I’ll test it for you!”

Without further ado, Kenichi clicked “Yes.” Light spilled out from the screen, leaving his apartment completely devoid of inhabitants.

Yamada Kenichi was no longer in this world.

Chapter 1: I Reincarnated as a Serf

So warm.

Kenichi came to and realized that he had lost consciousness. To his surprise, he now found himself submerged in liquid that was around the temperature of a heated pool.

Wait, I'm not breathing!

The realization that he was about to drown sent him into a panic. For some reason, however, he felt incredibly weak and could not move his body as he wanted.

Shit, I'm going to die at this ra— Uh, hold on. I'm not breathing, but I'm not exactly gasping for breath either. What's happening to me?

Despite being unable to see or breathe within this warm liquid, Kenichi felt completely fine. In fact, he even felt peaceful, as if all the mental fatigue that had been accumulating from his high-stress corporate job was melting away. So he simply gave himself up to the tranquility and let time pass.

Ten days later, a jolt of unease suddenly shot through Kenichi. It was a very strange sensation, one that he had never experienced before.

Hold on, is this...? Ugh, I'm being squeezed!

It was as if his entire body were being crushed. As before, however, he could not muster any strength into his limbs. He could not see, and he could not hear. All he had was his consciousness. And just when the squeezing let up, Kenichi felt himself being dunked into what felt like lukewarm liquid again.

I can't breathe!

Although he had been all right with not breathing until now, he all at once felt desperate for air. As he flailed around in distress, he suddenly felt an impact on his behind that was abruptly followed by more in quick succession. He realized that he was being slapped.

That hurts! Whaddaya think you're doing?!

"WAAAAAHHHH! WAAAAAAHHHH!"

"He's breathing! Theresia, you did it!"

"Oh, honey..."

It was Kenichi's first time hearing these voices. His eyes and ears still could not see or hear clearly, but he identified what he heard as Japanese.

Now that his airway was clear, he took a deep breath of the oxygen that his lungs sought so badly. After being lifted from the warm water, something strange and rough enveloped his body. Things finally settled down a while later.

Yeah, there's no doubt about it—I've been reincarnated. I can't be more grateful. That said, why did I regain my consciousness before my birth?! Couldn't it have been when I turned five or something?!

□□□

Six months passed. Kenichi spent that time constantly surveying his surroundings. His eyesight gradually improved, as did his hearing. He also became capable of crawling around, which widened his sphere of activity by quite a bit.

“Do you want to go beddy-bye, Allen?”

“Yah!”

One thing that had become clear to Yamada Kenichi within this time was that his new name in this world was Allen. And although he had not been able to select his gender, he had reincarnated as male once again.

The person currently holding him was his mother, Theresia. She was a very pretty woman with green eyes and brown hair that was always tied up in a ponytail. Age-wise, she was almost twenty.

Theresia gently placed Allen back in his bed—a small frame with wooden railings—and pulled his coarse hemp blanket up to his shoulders.

“Theresia, I’m home!”

This next person entering from the part of the house with an earthen floor was a man with a solid build, covered in sweat and smeared all over with dirt. This was Allen’s father, Rodin. He had brown hair like Theresia’s and a rugged face. His build was quite sizable and muscular. He was around twenty years old. Because Theresia almost always referred to him as “honey,” it had taken Allen quite a while to learn his name.

Theresia handed Rodin two steamed potatoes, at which a quizzical look came over his face. He asked, “You already ate?”

“Huh?” returned Theresia, otherwise at a loss for words. Seeing this, Rodin gave one of the potatoes back to his wife, completing this exchange that had been repeated multiple times during the previous six months.

“Come on, you know you shouldn’t do that. If you don’t eat properly, you can’t produce enough milk. The tax reduction on the village lasts until next year, so we’ve got to let Allen grow as big as possible until then.”

“Thank you, honey.”

What is this village’s name though?

Apparently, this village was a brand-new settlement that had been set up under the orders of the lord of the fiefdom. Every once in a while, Allen’s parents would talk about new babies being born to the other families in the village, leading him to suspect that most settlers here were quite young.

And I’m this couple’s only kid so far.

In this family, there was Rodin, the father; Theresia, the mother; and Allen, the firstborn. Rodin and Theresia had come to this village partly because of the tax cut it received as a frontier village and partly to gain independence from their respective parents.

After wolfing down his potato and washing it all down with water from a jug, Rodin went back out. Before he did so, however, he made sure to plant a kiss on Theresia’s cheek as always. The two were clearly still quite in love with each other. Allen might very well be getting a younger sibling soon.

Living as a serf isn’t easy, but it looks like it’s still a pretty good life.

As Allen was the one who had chosen to be a serf himself in his previous world, he was not dissatisfied with his current situation. He had a pretty mom and a dad who loved his family. But if he really had to put his finger on the one thing that was bothering him...

Status: Open, he chanted inside his mind, raising a chubby hand into the air. However, nothing happened, leaving him no choice but to put his hand back down.

Did I really become a Summoner? Maybe I'm too young to Summon anything? I can't even check my own Status. Now this is true Hell Mode. I've got nothing to do.

Allen was a six-month-old infant, nothing more, nothing less. Although he had selected Summoner as his class before his reincarnation, there had been zero hints of anything relevant to this ability as of yet.

Light novels that start off like what I'm experiencing normally depict the protagonist circulating mana within his body since infancy and obtaining massive MP capacity. The problem is, I can't feel anything remotely like that inside myself.

Drowsiness eventually overtook him before an answer came. His body was still that of a baby, so he would cry when hungry, he would pee and poo himself, and he would still conk out when sleepy.

□□□

Another six months passed, and Allen turned one. Fall had just arrived, which meant he himself had been born in the fall. The spread at dinner that night was more extravagant than usual. As he was in the middle of being weaned, his diet now largely consisted of simmered beans or steamed potatoes mashed into a paste with a wooden pestle.

"It's such a feast tonight! Good job hunting that great boar, honey."

"I did it all for Allen!"

"Dankyu, papa, mama."

As Allen's family were serfs, farming was their main job. In the field next to their house, they grew potatoes, wheat, and other crops. This was information that Allen had gleaned solely through the conversation between his parents as he was almost always in Theresia's arms and had never been brought out beyond the garden.

When fall came and all the harvesting was over, the men of the village would gather to hunt in the nearby forest. This was something that the strapping Rodin really enjoyed—so much so that he had remarked many times that, had he been born a commoner instead of a serf, he would have chosen to be a hunter. Anyone who participated in the hunt would get to take home a portion of the meat, so he gave it his all whenever he joined in.

There's almost no seasoning in this whatsoever.

Although his food tasted only of the rudimentary flavors of its ingredients, Allen still did his best to seem like he was enjoying it for the sake of his parents who had prepared it. Besides this, there was also some mashed apple-like fruit that was actually quite tasty.

After dinner, Allen lay in bed. He thought, *I guess this life isn't all that bad. I'll probably become a Summoner eventually.* He idly lifted his hand toward the ceiling and, like he had done dozens of times before, chanted inside his mind, *Status: Open*.

Fwum.

To Allen's surprise, a black book suddenly appeared before his eyes, floating in midair.

“Waaaahhhhhhh!”

“Allen?!”

Oops, I accidentally made myself cry. Calm down, me! Uh, let’s recite the prime numbers!

Perhaps due to being a one-year-old, Allen had trouble controlling his own emotions. When he burst into a wail, Theresia, who thought she had just put him to sleep, immediately rushed over in worry.

Oh no, she’s going to see this book! Go away!

“What’s wrong, Allen? Are you all right?”

Just as Allen wished for it, the book disappeared.

“Uh-huh, uh-huh.”

Phew, purposely speaking in baby talk takes effort. Well, my mouth isn’t fully developed yet, so it’s not like I can enunciate properly anyway.

The child smiled and gestured in an attempt to reassure his mother. She patted his shoulder gently as if to say, “No more surprises, all right?” before returning to the earthen floor area.

I didn’t get caught? But I should have been, timing-wise. Hold on, maybe other people can’t see the book?

There had been enough time between Theresia entering the room and the book disappearing that she would definitely have noticed it floating in midair. However, not once did she look in the book’s direction.

The fact that it might not be a problem gave Allen the confidence to call the book back out.

Fwum.

Yep, there it is. It’s a really thick book with a pitch-black hard cover. Do I get a book because I’m a Summoner?

Allen took a closer look at the tome before his eyes. His impression was that it looked like the kind of encyclopedia that would be stored at the National Diet Library back in Japan. Nothing was written on either its spine or its front cover.

Uh… Spin.

On a whim, Allen mentally ordered the book to spin. Sure enough, it began rotating. In the same way, he learned that he could bid it to fly closer. When he touched it, he found that it had the same texture as a normal book.

It feels like regular paper. What’s written inside though?

As the book was already floating in midair, Allen tried mentally willing it to turn a page.

Whoa! I finally get to see my Status!

The sight of what was written on the first page caused a wave of delight more intense than anything Allen had ever felt before to well up from deep within him.

Name: Allen
Age: 1
Class: Summoner
Level: 1
HP: 4 (40)
MP: 2 (20)
Attack: 1 (10)
Endurance: 1 (10)
Agility: 2 (25)
Intelligence: 3 (30)
Luck: 2 (25)
Skills: Summoning {1}, Creation {1}, Deletion
XP: 0/1,000

Interesting. Now, what can I make out from this?

Allen's favorite motto was "One who is in control of their Status is in control of the game." The key to beating games was figuring out the best way to take advantage of a character's Status.

The parentheses next to the numerical stat values are normal, whereas the parentheses next to skill names are curly. I assume that means they imply different things. Oh, hold on. There's something on the second page too.

Skill LevelsSummoning: 1
Creation: 1
Skill ExperienceCreation: 0/1,000
Creatable SummonsInsect: H
Beast: H
HolderInsect: H x 0
Beast: H x 0

It turned out to be more detailed information related to the Summoning skill. Allen flipped between the two pages a few times.

The skill levels on the second page match with the numbers in the curly brackets after the skill names on the first page, so I guess that's one mystery solved. Plus all of the stat numbers seem to be a tenth of the numbers in the following parentheses—maybe they're being suppressed due to my age?

According to Allen's deduction, his stats were currently a mere portion of their full value. After all, it did make sense for there to be a difference between the stats of an adult and a child.

And that's about all I can figure out from the Status page. Anything else would be going beyond hypothesizing to mere guessing.

Instead of mulling over something he had no answers to, Allen decided to first focus on what he could actually determine at the moment. His eyes fell on the second page.

So, Summoning and Creation are listed separately. And whereas Creation has a counter for XP, Summoning doesn't. It's probably at zero because I've never used it before. The fact that there's a denominator most likely means it'd level up once I gather a thousand XP, right?

The condition for gaining XP was not specified, so there was no way to tell at a glance. However, it was common sense to a gamer that using a skill repeatedly would yield XP in said skill.

According to what's here on the skills page, I can only Summon insects and beasts at the moment. What does the "H" mean? I've seen letters used to denote things like adventurer rank in otherworld series—like how a lot of protagonists end up as Rank S adventurers. If things are the same here, does that mean there are a total of nine tiers with S, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H? Nah, it wouldn't start that low, right? That kind of system would start off at E at the lowest, I imagine. I've never heard of a Rank H monster before.

Back in his previous world, Kenichi used to read otherworld light novels pretty much every day—sometimes during his commute, sometimes as a way to relax after an intense gaming session. As a result, he was quite familiar with the tropes used in this genre.

That's about all I can tell for now. I'd have to actually try Summoning to learn anything else.

But before giving Summoning a try, Allen thought it a good idea to check the other pages of the book too, just in case there was more information aside from his own Status.

There are so few pages even though the book is so thick.

Whenever he attempted to flip one page, a thick section of pages would turn all at once. Belying its appearance, the book contained a limited number of available pages. What's more, the next blank page was not normal—it had several rectangular depressions arranged in portrait orientation.

Is something supposed to go in these? There are a total of ten depressions. Very interesting.

There was no explanation—the impressions were just there. Allen's first guess was that they were for storing some sort of cards.

Is there anything else of note? Hold on, there's a glowing page at the very end.

The single page that was faintly shining caught Allen's attention, prompting him to flip it open.

This is...a letter? No, it looks more like an announcement.

[redacted]

Dear Mr. Allen,

We hope this letter finds you well. Are you enjoying your life in this world?

We wish to take this opportunity to apologize for the delayed delivery of your grimoire. We are truly sorry for any inconveniences caused.

As the Summoner class was still in development, we had yet to finish the necessary administrative procedures. Please rest assured that we have done everything within our power to expedite the process.

Please note that we do not accept questions regarding the book nor requests for a class change. We ask for your kind understanding.

Sincerely yours,
Elmea, God of Creation

So that's what it was. Well, I was also partly responsible for ignoring the warning message about this class still being in testing. If they've spent a whole year on it, I can expect it to be pretty well-developed, right?

Allen's reaction to this message was surprisingly positive. At the same time, he felt reminded once again that this was indeed another world.

When he finished reading the letter, the words faded away from the page, leaving it blank.

Is this everything? If I haven't overlooked anything, then I guess it's time to give Summoning a try. Um, I can choose between insect and beast, right?

Those two were the only options currently listed under Creatable Summons on the second page of the grimoire. There was no way to tell what was going to appear. It seemed likely that these first Summons were extremely weak, but it would be a huge issue if Beast H turned out to be a wolf or a bear. With Summoner being a class ranked even higher than Demon Lord, it would not hurt to err on the side of caution.

I'm indoors right now, so I should probably go with the insect instead.

A whole year had passed since Allen had reincarnated into this world. Everything that happened during that time suddenly flashed through his mind. The memories of nursing from the boobies of his pretty mother. Memories of getting wiped down by his pretty mother. Memories of his pretty mother changing his diapers.

No, no, no, gotta get my mind out of the gutter. All right, let's do this! Summon: Insect H!

Allen raised a hand and, in the same way he had been willing the book to move, willed the Summoning.

However, nothing happened. The nursery remained silent.

Uh…did anything happen? Is it on the ground, maybe?

The absence of any noticeable change prompted Allen to get up and look all over. He squinted his eyes and peered around the dimly lit room, but ultimately could not find anything resembling an insect.

Was that maybe the wrong chant? Insect, I choose you!

Nothing stirred.

Suspecting that merely thinking it was insufficient, Allen chanted “Arise, insect!” aloud, trying his best not to lisp. However, it was to no avail.

Well, this is a problem. What should I do?

After thinking about it for a while, Allen decided to give his grimoire another once-over. Back in his previous world, almost every game had detailed walkthrough sites explaining everything. Some even had forums where players could ask and answer each other’s questions. There was never an instance where he would be at a complete loss. In contrast, this world had no such resources, leaving him to do all the thinking and experimenting by himself.

Oh, maybe I need to Create a Summon before being able to call it out?

Summoning, Creation, and Deletion had all been listed under the Skills category on the first page. As such, Allen decided to give Creation a try.

Create: Insect!

“Wha—?!”

This time, it was the grimoire’s cover that began glowing, not a page. The previously dark room was suddenly illuminated, giving Allen a bit of a surprise.

Hold on, there are words here!

On the front cover of the grimoire was a single line written in silver letters.

<Which rank of an Insect Card do you wish to Create?>

If it’s asking me to specify the rank, it must mean “H” is a rank after all. Create: Insect H!

Immediately, a card appeared before Allen’s eyes.

There we go! A card! It’s got an illustration of an insect on it! This is a grasshopper, right?

<One Insect H Card has been Created.>

The card was roughly a quarter the size of the book cover. It was decorated with a beautiful picture of a grasshopper and had the words “Insect H” at the top left corner. The MP field in Allen’s Status had changed from “2” to “0,” indicating that MP had been expended in the process.

But a grasshopper? It doesn’t look strong at all. And to be honest, when I think “summoning,” “bug” is hardly the first thing that comes to mind.

Allen had spent the last year dreaming of summoning great serpents from Greek mythology and heroic spirits from the past. Reality, however, gave him a single card depicting a mere grasshopper. What’s more, making that one card had cost him all the MP he had.

Well, there’s no point in lamenting over it. Turns out the impressions in the grimoire are slots for these cards. So I’m supposed to start collecting them from now on?

Getting this card seemed to have answered quite a lot of questions for Allen and gave him a general idea of how his class worked.

Let’s continue tomorrow. The night’s completely dark now and I can’t see anything anyway.

The room, which had been quite dim before, was now entirely shrouded in darkness. Allen had no light to see by, which meant there was no choice but to obediently turn in for the night.

□□□

“Good morning, Allen,” Theresia said as she threw the wooden shutters wide open, flooding the room with light.

“Goo’monin, mama.”

The sun had already climbed quite a distance by now.

Looks like a day in this world is also around twenty-four hours. It’s about 8 a.m. right now, I’d say?

Just like Allen himself, both his parents had been serfs from birth. Because they had no proper education, Allen had trouble learning standards or units of measurement from them. It was difficult for him to broach the subject without raising suspicion, being a one-year-old and all, but his parents never seemed to ever bring it up in conversation. He had finally learned about time recently, but was still completely in the dark regarding currency, weight, and distance.

Clearly I’m not going to be able to enjoy the cliché of being reincarnated into a house with a study full of books to read so I can get a head start on education.

A serf’s morning started early. As for how early…Allen had yet to ever see his father when he awoke in the morning, leading him to infer that his father probably left the house around 6 a.m. There was now talk of Theresia returning to join Rodin in the fields while Allen was asleep as he had grown a bit older.

With how small our house is, I can’t really attempt Summoning when my mother’s home. She comes in to check on me every once in a while when I’m awake too. Guess it’ll have to wait till it’s time for my afternoon nap.

Allen had not told his parents about being reincarnated from another world, nor about being a Summoner. He was still speaking with a baby’s lisp. He did not have any particular intention of telling them going forward either, as he feared they would believe he was possessed by a spirit or demon.

He spun his grimoire, waiting for time to pass. When all the clattering around from housework settled down, Theresia came in to let Allen breastfeed. He had been rather embarrassed in the beginning, but had gotten largely used to it by now. It was as if he was a sage or a hermit with how completely devoid of sexual urge he was.

“Sleep tight, Allen.”

“Goo’nai, mama.”

Here we go! Afternoon nap time!

Theresia carried Allen to the child's room and tucked him into his wooden cot. She closed the wooden windows, leaving him alone in the now dimly lit room.

All right, she's gone. Heh heh heh, let's continue where I left off yesterday.

He brought out his grimoire and retrieved the Insect H Card from its holder.

For starters, let's see if I can Summon without saying it out loud. Summon: Insect H!

Allen spread both his arms wide and did his best to generate the feeling of Summoning something. In response, the card shone bright and crumbled away. In exchange, a grasshopper appeared.

"Ohhhh! Gwassoppaw!" Allen blurted inadvertently. His eyes were glued to the creature that had fallen to the ground outside the wooden slats surrounding his cot.

Hmm, it's not all that big. Around fifteen centimeters long, I'd say? Well, it is a bit bigger than normal, but otherwise looks like a common grasshopper.

The insect was just hopping around the room aimlessly. It showed no intention of meeting Allen's eyes.

It's my Summon, so it should at least listen to me, right? Come here. Coooome on.

For a split second, Allen's and the grasshopper's eyes finally met.

Hoh, you finally noticed me? Be not reserved. You may approach.

The baby flapped his hands in an effort to attract the creature's attention. However, it promptly turned away and reverted to its aimless hopping.

Okay, this isn't working. It's seriously just a grasshopper. It's got no intelligence and doesn't understand orders. And the grimoire isn't telling me anyth— Hold on, there's a new page.

Just as Allen thought to check his book for any additions after having successfully performed his first-ever Summoning, he noticed a third page that had not been there before.

I see, I get new information in the form of new pages in the grimoire. And this is the Status of this grasshopper.

The following was written on the grimoire's brand-new page:

```
Type: Insect
Rank: H
Name: None (Please set a name.)
HP: 3
MP: 0
Attack: 2
Endurance: 5
```

Agility: 5
Intelligence: 1
Luck: 2
Buffs: Endurance 1, Agility 1
Ability: Hop

It’s pretty weak but still generally about on par with me. Whoa, it has even higher Attack than I do. What is this “Buffs” field? Could it be that these are buffs for me? Wha—?! My own stats have gone up!

“Amajing!”

Compared to yesterday, Allen’s stats had now gone up by one in both Endurance and Agility. The pleasant surprise caused Allen to unthinkingly whoop out loud and clench his fists.

“Goodness, Allen. You gotta go beddy-bye properly, all right?” Theresia chided while coming back inside, having heard the shout from the garden right outside where she had been working.

Shoot! If she comes in right now, she’ll see the gra—

“Sowwie, mama.”

“Oh, it’s all right, sweetie,” Theresia cooed before she suddenly made eye contact with the Summon.

“NOOOOO, IT’S A BUUUUGGGG!” she screamed as she brought her foot down.

OH-NO, MY SUMMON GOT STOMPED! It... It’s gone...

The grasshopper disappeared in bubbles of light. Theresia, who thought she had let the insect escape, went off searching for it. Allen could not let his surprise show on his face, so he went to sleep instead, pretending like nothing had happened.

In this way, Allen took his very first step as a Summoner in this world.

Chapter 2: First Summon

Ten days had passed since Allen's first ever Summoning. He had just woken up from his afternoon nap and was now staring closely at the front cover of his grimoire where his Status was displayed. He was trying to decide what direction to take his training going forward.

During the past ten days, Allen had used his Summoning skill repeatedly during the moments when he was out of Theresia's supervision. Due to this, he had learned quite a few things.

First, in regard to the grimoire:

Whenever Allen mentally chants, "Grimoire," it appears.

Whenever he mentally chants, "Status," his Status appears in silver letters on the black cover of the grimoire.

Whenever he mentally chants, "Creation," silver letters asking what he wants to Create appear on the cover.

This was about it for the functions of the grimoire. Allen had not received any other communication from the deities of this world since.

Next, with regard to the cards that he could Create:

Allen can stock up a maximum of ten cards.

He can Summon a maximum of ten Summons at the same time.

He receives buffs corresponding to the cards in stock.

He can Summon and Unsummon the cards in stock as many times as he wants.

Due to the limit of cards being ten, a line asking him to "Please Delete one card" would appear on the grimoire's cover whenever Allen attempted to Create an eleventh one. Whether the cards had been Summoned or not had no bearing on the maximum limit.

During the past ten days, Allen had also tested out the abilities of Beast H.

```
Type: Beast
Rank: H
Name: Mousey
HP: 5
MP: 0
Attack: 5
Endurance: 2
Agility: 3
Intelligence: 1
Luck: 2
Buffs: HP 1, Attack 1
Ability: Scurry
```

After all his observations, he determined that:

Beast H looks like a rather large mouse.

Just like the grasshopper, it almost never listens to instructions.

Whenever Allen verbally or mentally commands, “Scurry,” it uses its Ability.

As was seen in the Status window, Allen had set Beast H’s name as “Mousey.” This name could also be used for both Summoning and Creation, and the process—just like all other functions—could be performed without actually saying anything out loud. It was true that referring to Summons by type and rank was more appropriate for carrying out tests and analysis, but it just felt wrong to not have actual names for them. So while he was at it, Allen assigned Insect H the name “Denka” as well.

At this point in time, the Summons had remained unresponsive to all instructions that Allen attempted to give them. He originally thought it a matter of training, but they showed no signs of improvement even after he worked with them for a while. He eventually settled on the theory that this was due to their low Intelligence.

There was, however, one thing that he could command them to do. All Summons had an Ability, with Beast H’s being “Scurry.” Whenever Allen chanted the name of the Ability or simply the word “Ability” at a Summon, it would immediately begin performing that action. Allen could give this command again and again for any number of times, indicating that there was no MP cost for doing so. Allen was still working on giving commands to the Summons in hopes of finding something that they would respond to other than their Abilities, but had yet to see any signs of progress.

It had been a full ten days of experimentation while fighting off insistent drowsiness and hunger, as well as keeping attentive to Theresia’s movements at all times. Over the course of this period, she had reduced three grasshoppers to particles of light. Their house was little better than a hovel, so naturally it had no insulation or soundproofing and there were plenty of cracks all over that insects often entered through. Denka, however, was larger than most and therefore quite reviled by Theresia.

Come on Mousey, I know you can do it if you put your mind to it. Come to me!

Allen stretched both his hands toward the Beast H in the corner of his room. The creature suddenly turned his way, as if a connection had indeed been established.

“Oh?”

Just as the thought that he had finally succeeded in taming a Summon flashed across Allen’s mind, the Beast H looked away again and reverted to its erratic scurrying.

Gah, didn’t work after all. Seriously, how is this a class with more stars than a Demon Lord?

However, while it seemed impossible to control the Summons, it was not as if their existence was entirely meaningless.

They may not be able to help me fight, but if I stock up ten Mousey cards in the grimoire, it raises my Attack by ten. I almost crapped my pants that time I managed to pick up a whole log despite only being one year old.

Thanks to awakening to his powers as a Summoner, Allen was now far stronger than any ordinary baby his age. And through his repeated usage of the Creation and Summoning skills, he was starting to understand how his class was meant to be developed.

But the requirements for leveling up sure are ridiculous. I guess that's Hell Mode for you.

Leveling up in Hell Mode was supposedly a hundred times harder than in Normal Mode. It was said that at the end of this path lay "the key to a Principle of the World," but reaching that far would require extraordinary and unceasing effort.

I've finally gathered 24 Skill XP. Looks like the amount of MP I expend converts to XP in a one-to-one ratio. At least, that's how it seems at the moment. Unfortunately, I don't possess a skill that costs more than 2 MP to prove or disprove my theory.

Allen had also learned the following facts regarding MP and Skill XP through his experiments:

It costs 2 MP to Create a Rank H card.

The expended MP counts toward Skill XP.

Materializing a Summon from its card does not cost any MP.

Reverting a Summon to its card does not cost any MP.

Allen's MP recovers to full after sleeping for half the day (i.e., six hours).

In short, the way to improve a skill was to keep using it. If Allen wanted to level up Creation, then he had to Create cards again and again.

However, it costs 2 MP to use Creation, and my max MP is also 2. If I only make one card each day, it's going to take me 500 days to reach Level 2. Considering how my MP tops back up after six hours, I should probably aim to use Creation twice each day. It'd still take 250 days, but I'll take what I can get.

Leveling up under Hell Mode was clearly not going to be easy. As Allen was still a baby, he needed between twelve to fifteen hours of sleep each day. The fact that his MP would recover in six hours meant that he could theoretically expend it four times each day; however, there was no clock in the house, making it difficult for him to wake up at regular hours. During the past ten days, he had been able to Create three cards on some days, while there were others where he could only manage one. This was why he decided to aim for an average of two casts per day.

I'd really appreciate a function for writing down the observations I make. With how thick this grimoire is, can't it spare at least a few pages?

What Allen really wanted was a place to record his discoveries from the past ten days. As a gamer, he was naturally familiar with using spreadsheet software to analyze things like level-ups and stat growth. Although he knew

better than to ask for something so sophisticated, he hoped for at least a few blank pages to write whatever he wanted.

While Allen was in the middle of pleading with the gods for the ability to use the unused pages in his grimoire, a jubilant voice called out from the part of the house with the earthen floor. “Theresia, I’m home!” shouted Rodin.

Hey, he’s back! Judging by his voice, they pulled it off!

“You’re back early, honey,” Theresia replied, popping up. When she saw her husband caked in mud, however, she exclaimed, “Wait, are you all right?!”

“Oh, totally fine, I’m not hurt. The great boar put up a fight and I ended up being bowled over is all. Is Allen awake?”

It was currently the middle of October. Fall was fully underway, and most of the harvesting had wrapped up, with potatoes being pretty much the only thing left. As such, Rodin had gone out today to hunt in the nearby woods together with a group of men from the village.

Of course, all the participants of the hunt were serfs. This was a term that Allen associated with farming, but for some reason he had yet to learn, these men often went out hunting from mid-fall through winter every year.

“If you’re fine, then that’s all that matters. Are…you sure about bringing Allen?”

“I did promise to show him where the butchering is going on. They’ve already started, so I’ve gotta hurry a little,” Rodin answered as he headed into the nursery with lumbering steps. “Allen, wakey wakey. We caught a whole great boar! It’s so big it’ll blow your mind!”

“Leally, papa? I wan’ see gate boa!” replied the (mentally) thirty-five-year-old in his best impression of a one-year-old who had just woken up.

“Just hang tight, buddy. You were a good boy, so I’m gonna bring you there now!”

“Yayyy! Goo’ boy!”

Back when Allen first heard his parents talking about the great boar hunts taking place, he had begged to see it the next time another one was brought back. Rodin had promised, “Sure, if you’re a good boy.” Allen was generally a rather obedient baby who rarely caused his parents trouble though, so there was no particular need to use the line. Allen suspected that Rodin just wanted to try saying it now that he was a father.

And so Allen was brought out of the house, nestled in Rodin’s arms—Theresia was not coming along because she did not want to see the butchering. Although Rodin’s clothes were a mess now after a full day of sweating, running, falling, and whatever else in the woods, for some strange reason, Allen found that he did not mind at all. After all, he knew just how hard his father worked for the sake of their family.

As it happened, this was Allen’s first time getting a good look at the frontier village. Up until now, he had only ever been able to catch glimpses through the wooden-framed windows and doorway of his house, as well as

whatever was within eyesight when Theresia worked in the yard while cradling him.

It's basically just a countryside covered with fields. Oh, a house!

The father and son pair continued down a path flanked by farmland. The fact that the fields sported different colors seemed to indicate there was a variety of crops being grown. Since it was mid-autumn, most had already been harvested, although crops similar to potatoes remained. Here and there, small houses dotted the expansive fields.

As Allen continued looking around inquisitively from the height of Rodin's chest, his father suddenly said, "Look, Allen! It's an albaheron!"

Following where Rodin was pointing, Allen spotted a solitary bird up in the sky. It was too far away to see clearly, but was obviously huge, possessing a wingspan of what appeared to be several meters. At the very least, it was larger than any avian that Allen knew of from his previous world.

"Aubahe'on?"

"That's right! They fly toward the north during fall. That one in the sky is by itself, but they sometimes fly in flocks. Remember them: it's said that when they start flying, it means fall's begun."

"Monsta?"

"Oh, you're so smart! Yep, they are monsters. They almost never come down, though. Your papa ate albaheron meat once and it was super yummy!"

"Yum!"

"Now, if you ever see a monster larger than an albaheron flying in the sky, make sure you run and hide inside the house right away, all right?"

"Dwagons! Skawy!"

Seeing how Rodin had fallen silent and simply stared at the creature in the sky, Allen called out to him in a quizzical tone, "Papa?"

"Hm? Oh, it's nothing. Look, we're almost at the square. Get ready to be surprised by how big the great boar is!"

"'Kay!"

This was something that Allen was told much later, but apparently this monster, the albaheron, was the inspiration for his name. His father had chosen it hoping that his son would one day be free like the albaheron, able to fly wherever he wanted. There was no way for Allen to understand these sentiments at the moment, however, so he merely occupied himself by looking around the village with curiosity.

After about an hour of walking, the fields gave way to proper structures. In the distance up ahead was what appeared to be the village entrance, partly hidden by a huge mass resting in front of it.

Looks like this is the residential area. Which makes the area where I live the village's outskir— Oh hey, it's a boar! This must be the great boar. It's the first monster I've ever seen!

Right before the gate leading out of the village was a monster that was already more than halfway dismantled. In spite of all the progress, however, it still somewhat maintained its original shape, leaving no doubt of it being a gigantic boar. There were around fifty people bustling about, helping out with the butchering in various capacities.

Damn, the closer we get, the larger it appears. This thing must be taller than three meters. It sure lives up to its name as a "great" boar.

Allen was overwhelmed by the incredible sense of presence emanating from the giant figure. If he really had to make a comparison with something from his previous world, it would be a hippo. He could not help but stare at the fangs protruding from either side of the creature's face. Despite having heard from his father that monsters existed in this world, this was his first time seeing one from such a close distance.

Rodin continued making his way forward with Allen in his arms. More and more people turned to look over.

As I thought, we're gathering quite the attention.

Allen had half-expected this to occur. The reason was simple.

"Hey, there you are, Rodin!" shouted one of the men currently taking part in the carving. "Guys, our MVP's here!"

"Come on, man, don't put me on the spot. You're embarrassing me."

"Well, you're late. The meat was about to run out, MVP!"

A man with even bigger muscles than Rodin approached. Thick hair sprouted both around his mouth and on his chest in a way that, when paired with his rugged features, gave him the appearance of a gorilla. He, too, was holding a child in his arms—a girl around Allen's age.

"Seriously, stop it, man. I just happened to get lucky and stab the great boar's jugular," Rodin replied, looking somewhat embarrassed by all the attention he was receiving.

"And I see you actually brought Allen! It's been so long since I last saw him. He really does have black hair and black eyes, huh!"

Both Theresia and Rodin had brown hair. However, although Allen's face seemed quite similar to his mother's, his hair and eyes were the same shade as that from his previous life. All the stares directed his way were due to this being a pretty rare color in this world.

"He's such a good child like you wouldn't believe, Gerda! Allen, say hi. This is Gerda, our neighbor."

"He'o. My name 's A'en."

Uh, wait, I greeted him like normal. How do one-year-olds greet people? Did I do it weird?

"You sure Allen's a one-year-old? He's completely different from Krena even though they're the same age. Can he give her some of whatever he's got?"

"Heh heh heh! My boy's super smart, unlike me!"

"All right, I'm not here to argue with you about whose kid's better. Here, Krena, say hi. What's your name?"

“Kwena…” the girl with pink hair and blue eyes said before burying her face in her father’s chest as if she was feeling bashful from all the attention.

I see, so that’s what I should have done.

“Hey, hey, what’s with the shyness all of a sudden, Krena?” Gerda asked teasingly. However, she kept her face averted, save the occasional glances she shot toward Allen. Every time that happened, their eyes met.

This was the moment of the pair’s first meeting.

After a fair bit of banter with his neighbor, Rodin finally reached the great boar carcass. As promised, he was letting Allen see it up close.

Whoa, so this is a monster. I’ll probably have to defeat monsters to level up, right? I wonder when I’ll become strong enough to fight them.

“Monsta stong?”

“This is a Rank C monster. Even we’d have to run away if we ran into anything stronger than this.”

He did mention they were a hunting party of twenty men. So as a general estimate, I can assume that twenty men would be needed to take down a Rank C monster.

As Allen continued observing what he could of the butchering from his position within Rodin’s arms, someone else came over to let Rodin know that his share was ready. Together, they walked toward a corner of the square. The man picked up a large chunk of meat tied up with string and handed it to Rodin.

That’s huge. It weighs, what, ten kilograms, maybe? So the reward for hunting great boars is meat. Ahhh, which means the dried meat that appears in our meals every now and then must be great boar meat?

Rodin accepted the package with the hand not cradling Allen. There were several other men also holding chunks of meat, indicating they had likely been part of the hunting party.

“You had enough yet, Allen? Theresia’s waiting for us, so let’s go home.”

“Mm!”

With that, the father and son turned around and headed back the way they had come.

□ □ □

A year and ten months had passed since Allen was first born into this world. Two months from now he would turn two.

Thanks to being blessed with loving parents, he grew up quickly and healthily. Just a while ago he had become fully weaned. Although the family was poor, Rodin and Theresia poured everything they had into bringing up Allen. He had started thinking that this, too, was a form of happiness.

The lifestyle of a serf was not all that terrible. According to Allen’s knowledge from his previous world, there were two things that defined a serf: the lack of freedom to choose a profession and the inability to own land. This was a system that had been quite common up until the 19th century. From what he observed, the serfs in this world also seemed to be under similar restrictions.

Furthermore, Allen had figured out within the past ten months that this world's calendar was also split into twelve months per year. Each month had thirty days, and these thirty days were further divided into five weeks of six days each.

What's more, there were four seasons, with the environment changing according to whether it was spring, summer, fall, or winter. There was snowfall in winter, at least enough to make Allen's house—which had negligible insulation, being little more than a shack—quite cold.

Memories of the past ten months flashed by in an instant as Allen stared at the lines of text currently displayed on the cover of his grimoire. Although the cover itself was jet-black, whenever Allen used a skill or there was a change to his Status, a notification would appear in silver letters, rather like the system log of a game.

And within the lines of silver, there was now one that shone gold. Going forward, Allen was going to associate this color with happiness.

<The Skill XP of Creation has reached 1,000/1,000. Creation has reached Lvl. 2. Summoning has reached Lvl. 2. You have obtained Synthesis Lvl. 1. You have obtained Expansion Lvl. 1. The Memo function has been added to the grimoire.>

"HELL YEAAAAHHHHH!!!"

This was the moment when Allen, as a gamer, finally felt rewarded for all his prior effort. He did not care anymore about the bland food or cold winters. Thanks to it being summer, Theresia was currently out in the fields with Rodin, so he could whoop as loudly as he wanted.

Oh my god, where do I even start? Right, Status! What's my Status like now?!

There were plenty of things that Allen wanted to examine regarding the golden text on the cover of his grimoire, but he decided to first see what changes had come with the level up.

Name: Allen
Age: 1
Class: Summoner
Level: 1
HP: 4 (40) + 8
MP: 0 (20)
Attack: 1 (10) + 8
Endurance: 1 (10) + 2
Agility: 2 (25) + 2
Intelligence: 3 (30)
Luck: 2 (25)
Skills: Summoning {2}, Creation {2}, Synthesis {1}, Expansion {1}, Deletion
XP: 0/1,000

Skill LevelsSummoning: 2
Creation: 2
Synthesis: 1
Skill ExperienceCreation: 0/10,000
Synthesis: 0/1,000
Creatable SummonsInsect: GH
Beast: GH
???: G
HolderInsect: H x 2
Beast: H x 8
???:

Th-This is... Whoa, what's this new "???" field?

There were so many exciting new changes that Allen found himself frozen with indecision for a short while. He gripped the grimoire with his small, chubby hands and simply stared at it for fifteen minutes.

No, stop, calm down. Uh, so, Creation has gone up, Summoning has gone up, and now I can Summon Rank G creatures? So maybe the higher Summoning becomes, the more variety of Summons will be available? I really want to try Creating the newly added Summons right now, but I'm out of MP. So that will have to wait until later. Let's see what we can learn about everything else then.

All right, first, "Synthesis." Does this mean I'll be able to Synthesize Summons? They're usually kept in card form, so if I combine cards together, it'll give me a completely different Summon? But to try it out, I'd also need MP, and...yep, it's still at 0.

Okay, next. To level up Creation again, I'd need 10,000 Skill XP. Why the hell is it ten times higher?! Even if I manage to maintain a pace of Creating three cards a day, it'd still take me four and a half years. That's way too long. Maybe I should look for a way to raise my overall level to gain more MP.

As for "Expansion"... Oh! There are now twenty total impressions inside the grimoire! Since I get stat bonuses from each card I have in stock, being able to stock twice the number of cards means I can double the buffs from before! Nice!

And lastly, what's this about the "Memo" function? Oooo, there're blank pages labeled "Memo" now. And it picks up on my thoughts and automatically dictates them! Sweet! This is going to be so convenient. Maybe all the prayers I sent up really did reach the gods.

Well then, I think that's about it for now. My MP is still at 0, so let's nap, then continue this tonight.

Allen dozed off once again, warmed not only by the noontime sun but also by the knowledge of all the blessings that leveling up had brought him.

□□□

As soon as Rodin and Theresia arrived home, they left their farming equipment in the earthen-floored area and used water from a large jug to wash the dirt off their hands. After washing their faces as well, they took a few gulps. Every morning, Rodin refilled this jug at the well. The family also used this water to do their cooking.

“Were you a good boy, Allen, hon? I’ll have dinner ready soon.” By now, Theresia’s baby talk had decreased by quite a bit. It was apparently a conscious decision made for Allen’s sake, considering how his weaning period had ended.

“Yes, mama,” Allen replied.

Just as Theresia promised, dinner was done in no time at all. As cooking here in Rodin’s family rarely involved using spices and condiments, it was mostly a matter of boiling or grilling. It was Rodin’s job to crush the greens, beans, or potatoes that Allen would be eating. Once everything was ready, the family simply dug in without saying grace or praying over the food. Since this village was rather isolated, conversation over the dinner table usually revolved around the same few topics.

“Oh, right, Gerda mentioned that Krena’s getting so active that she’s becoming quite a handful. He asked if Allen could become her playmate.”

“Hm?” Allen looked up, recalling the pink-haired child that he had seen in the arms of the man named Gerda. *Oh right, we have neighbors. Although I haven’t seen them since that time with the great boar.*

The fields tilled by the frontier villagers were quite expansive, so despite technically being neighbors, Gerda’s house was much too far for Allen, who had not turned two yet, to travel to by himself. In addition, Theresia and Rodin were still insistent on not letting him out of the house by himself, so he obediently stayed home. Because of this, Allen had only seen their “neighbors” once.

“That sounds like a good idea,” Theresia replied happily. “The two of them might get married in the future, so I hope they get along well!”

Allen and Krena were of the same age, and their parents were already close. In the insular world of serfs, it was quite common for children under such circumstances to marry each other.

“I can go outside?” Allen asked, perking up.

Theresia ruffled his hair. “Once you become three, all right?”

Unfortunately, his ban on going outside was still in place until he turned three, even if it was to visit their neighbor’s house.

□ □ □

After their peaceful dinner was over, Allen returned to his room.

Heh heh heh, my MP’s recovered! Without further ado, let’s get started. Hmm, should I try Synthesis, or should I try Creating a Rank G card? All right, let’s go with Synthesis!

Out came the grimoire. As soon as Allen strongly thought, *Synthesize!* the pages started flapping. It turned to a spread where the left page had two impressions and the right had a single impression.

Does this mean I'm supposed to combine two cards together into one? I'm not sure what the conditions are for Synthesizing. Well, if it's all the same, let's start with two Beast H cards.

Allen took two Beast H cards out of their holders and slotted them into this page.

Synthesize!

However, nothing happened.

Did I do it wrong?

Allen checked the log on the front of the grimoire. He had developed the habit of doing this often, as a notification would appear there whenever anything happened. And sure enough, there was a new message.

<You do not have enough MP to use Synthesis Lvl. 1.>

"Wha—?! Not enough?!" Allen inadvertently cried out loud. He clapped his hands over his mouth in a fluster. As it turned out, 2 MP was not enough to use the Synthesis skill.

Wait, is that it? Even my max MP isn't enough. Um, okay, what about Creating a Rank G card?

As he was unsure what "???" was, Allen decided to attempt Creating a Beast G card.

Create: Beast G!

Again, nothing happened. And again, there was a message on the front cover.

<You do not have enough MP to Create a Beast G card.>

Whaaaat?! My current MP isn't enough to cast Synthesis or Create Rank G cards?!

Allen found himself at a complete loss. As it turned out, there was still a lot that he could not do despite having leveled up.

Chapter 3: Krena and Playing Knight

When Allen turned three, he finally received permission from Theresia to go outside, with the condition that he stayed near the house. His birthday was October 1 according to the calendar of this world. This was also the day of the village's Harvest Festival, which was the reason why the dinner table was always especially bountiful on his birthdays. He did not particularly mind—if asked, he would say that it felt as if he was getting to celebrate Christmas and his birthday together at the same time.

Speaking of the Harvest Festival, here in this world, this was not an occasion involving the villagers gathering in the village square and dancing around a bonfire. Rather, it was a day when the village chief went to a religious facility called a "church" to give offerings to the deity of abundant harvest. Naturally, serfs had no part in such a ritual; in fact, Rodin had even gone out on a hunt on the day of Allen's first birthday.

Over the past three years, Allen had learned quite a lot about being a serf. For example, he now knew that sixty percent of their harvest was supposed to be paid to their village chief, who would then arrange to have it passed along to their domain lord as tax. This frontier village had enjoyed lowered taxes for a certain number of years after its founding, but that period had just expired and they were now taxed in full. However, because tax was percentage-based, the more they harvested, the more they would get to keep for themselves. On the flip side, if someone's harvest was poor or if they attempted to evade paying the tax, they would be made a slave, a status even lower than serf.

After sixty percent was garnished as tax, however, it was not as if the remaining forty was all for direct consumption. Part of this remainder, together with the meat from the hunts, had to be used to barter for other necessities, such as salt and the cloth used as Allen's diapers. This world—or at least, this area of this world—had all four seasons. Although it was not as if there would be fierce blizzards during the winter, it would still snow enough to paint the entire landscape white. As such, firewood was crucial for keeping warm. About half of each ten-kilogram block of meat Rodin brought back usually went toward buying firewood.

Commerce among serfs here in this frontier village was largely barter-based. However, it was not as if they never saw money. Allen remembered that when he had broken out into a high fever during February this year, Rodin had pried up one of the floorboards in the nursery, revealing a small stash of coins that he then quickly left the house with. When he'd returned, he had made Allen drink what was likely medicine meant to help lower the fever.

At that time, he must have used the large majority of their savings, as there were only a few copper and iron coins left underneath the floorboard. There were also five pebble-like objects inside the stash that were

apparently magic stones dropped by horned rabbits. This incident had been Allen's first exposure to this world's currency and magic stones.

Right now, Allen was sitting with his back to the tree that was growing in their garden. Although it was not all that huge, it provided sufficient cover. The fence surrounding their house was quite easy to peek through, and he wanted a way to hide from passing eyes as he focused on analyzing his class.

Well, it looks like that's all I can learn about Synthesis Lvl. 1 and Creation Lvl. 2.

When he turned three, his max MP had gone up, which allowed him to finally experiment with Synthesis and the next level of Creation. This included finding out the details of the Rank G cards that he now had at his disposal.

To sum up the results of his observations:

```
Using Creation Lvl. 2 costs 5 MP.
Using Synthesis Lvl. 1 costs 5 MP.
Combining Insect G with Beast G leads to Bird G.
```

He had noted down everything he had learned inside his grimoire and was largely finished with his analysis. With a Bird G resting on his shoulder, he took a look at his Status.

```
Name: Allen
Age: 3
Class: Summoner
Level: 1
HP: 12 (40) + 26
MP: 1 (20)
Attack: 3 (10) + 26
Endurance: 3 (10) + 6
Agility: 7 (25) + 10
Intelligence: 9 (30) + 4
Luck: 7 (25)
Skills: Summoning {2}, Creation {2}, Synthesis {1}, Expansion
{1}, Deletion
XP: 0/1,000
Skill LevelsSummoning: 2
Creation: 2
Synthesis: 1
Skill ExperienceCreation: 4,701/10,000
Synthesis: 20/1,000
Creatable SummonsInsect: G, H
Beast: G, H
Bird: G
```

HolderInsect: G x 2, H x 2
Beast: G x 12, H x 2
Bird: G x 2

Hmm, what should I do next? I've just confirmed that the amount of MP spent is indeed a one-to-one ratio to the amount of Skill XP gained. In that case, rather than using Creation Lvl. 2 or Synthesis Lvl. 1, it'd probably be a better use of my MP to spam Creation Lvl. 1 and grind toward Creation Lvl. 3. Otherwise, I would have unused leftover MP and that would just be a waste.

Currently, Allen's max MP was 6. Each cast of Creation Lvl. 1 cost 2 MP, whereas Creation Lvl. 2 and Synthesis Lvl. 1 both cost 5 MP. Clearly, using Creation Lvl. 1 was the most efficient option for converting his MP into Skill XP.

Well, that should do for skill leveling. Next is...

"Hey, Allen," Allen said toward the bird on his shoulder before mentally giving it an order.

"Yep, I'm Allen!" the bird replied.

Nice! Looks like the Summons suddenly got a lot more useful upon hitting Rank G.

The Statuses of the three new Summons were as follows:

Type: Insect
Rank: G
Name: Hopper
HP: 7
MP: 0
Attack: 6
Endurance: 10
Agility: 10
Intelligence: 7
Luck: 8
Buffs: Endurance 2, Agility 2
Ability: Provoke

Type: Beast
Rank: G
Name: Moley
HP: 10
MP: 0
Attack: 10
Endurance: 6
Agility: 5
Intelligence: 7

Luck: 6
Buffs: HP 2, Attack 2
Ability: Dig

Type: Bird
Rank: G
Name: Chappy
HP: 7
MP: 0
Attack: 5
Endurance: 6
Agility: 10
Intelligence: 10
Luck: 8
Buffs: Agility 2, Intelligence 2
Ability: Voice Mimic

Their stats were still quite low and, just like the Rank H Summons, the Rank G ones also did not listen to orders. However, what caught Allen's attention were their Abilities.

Bird G was capable of perfectly reproducing Allen's voice. The degree of mimicry was far beyond what normal parrots could achieve, with the only limitation being that Chappy could not remember anything too long or overly complicated.

Beast G, which had just popped its head out of the ground, was a mole the size of a small dog. Its Ability enabled it to easily dig holes thirty centimeters wide and one meter deep.

Moley would probably be really helpful for digging pitfalls, right?

The usage of a Summon's Ability seemed more-or-less unrestricted, considering how doing so did not cost MP and had no cooldown. Although Beast G still wouldn't listen to any other orders, it could be relied on to dig a hole wherever Allen willed it to.

The final new Summon, Insect G, was currently crouched right next to Allen. Its size and appearance both seemed reminiscent of an American bullfrog.

Provoke.

"Ribbit, ribbit, ribbit."

Upon receiving Allen's command, the frog started jumping erratically and croaking loudly as its normally green skin flashed red and yellow.

The gears in Allen's head turned as he stared thoughtfully at Insect G. It seemed increasingly clear that the point of his class was *not* to simply call on powerful Summons and have them fight on his behalf. For example, Insect G could perhaps aggro a monster when it was in the middle of chasing Allen, whereas Beast G seemed to possess the potential for creating

large pitfalls. In short, the key to fully drawing out the capability of his class seemed to lie with properly understanding the characteristics of his Summons.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

A bell rang far in the distance, signaling to the whole village that it was now three in the afternoon.

Oh, it's already that time? Allen thought, picking up the wooden sword on the ground next to him.

□ □ □

Eight years after its founding, this frontier village had developed a rough town center near the front gate that included a commercial quarter with stores, an inn, the village chief's house, and the residences of the commoners of the village. The vast fields where Allen lived were still within the village limits, but considered part of the outskirts. As such, it made sense for the bell that indicated time to be set up near the village entrance where the population density was highest.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

Allen's heartbeat quickened as the thought of the unavoidable upcoming battle soon filled his mind. Roughly ten minutes after the bell fell silent, *she* arrived. She was both his friend and his rival.

"Allen, let's play!"

A little girl with shoulder-length pink hair and dazzling blue eyes rushed like a gust of wind through the crude gate that led into Allen's garden. She was wearing an outfit made of hemp—like what most serfs wore, Allen included—and holding something that seemed strangely incongruent with a little girl: a roughly hewn wooden sword.

Ever since Allen turned three, Krena had been coming over to play every single day. As soon as Gerda heard that Theresia had granted Allen permission to leave the house, he brought Krena over. At that time, Allen felt a sense of foreboding seeing the two wooden swords in the little girl's hands. And true enough, it turned out that Gerda was nearing his limits handling Krena's rough-and-tumbling fun. He was so desperate for Allen to become her playmate that he had looked ready to prostrate himself.

Ever since then, Krena started coming over every day at the stroke of the bell. Judging by how fast she arrived, she had likely dashed off literally at the very first peal.

There was a time when I had been quite baffled about how Gerda, with his bodybuilder-like physique, could have trouble dealing with his daughter. Now I totally get it though.

Krena's father, Gerda, was even more muscular than Rodin—the veins on his arms were practically popping out. Because of these two men, Allen was starting to get the mistaken impression that all serfs were super jacked.

"Good afternoon, Krena. You're full of energy again, I see. So, what do you want to play today?" Allen asked for confirmation's sake, even though the answer seemed quite obvious considering what the girl was holding.

"Mmmm!" Krena pouted, expressing indignation that he even had to ask. "Play knight, of course!"

"All right, then. The tree will be in our way here, so let's go over there."

"Sure!"

The pout on Krena's face immediately melted into a beaming smile as the two headed for a wider area. Allen knew full well by now how much the terrain and surroundings could affect a fight.

Eventually, the two children stopped at the most open part of the garden. They each held up a roughly hewn wooden sword—around thirty cm long, or a third of their own heights—at the ready.

"We start! I am Krena the knight! Here I come, Allen!"

"Come at me!"

"Noooo! You have to say it too!"

Krena pouted once again. As long as Allen did not "properly" name himself, the play session would not start. She swung her sword crossly in a little fit.

It's so freaking embarrassing though! Just what on earth were you teaching her, Gerda?! Why do I have to go all out with playacting at this age?! Though I am only three years old!

"I am Allen the knight! Let us fight with honor!" cried the thirty-eight-year-old while readjusting his doublehanded grip on his sword.

Having been satisfied with Allen's proclamation, Krena rushed forward, signaling the start of the fight. Allen parried her swing, but the shock of the impact still ran through his arms. In exchange, he brought his own weapon down with both hands, but she deflected it with ease.

The exchange continued, filling the air with the incessant clacking of wood against wood.

This is strange. There's definitely something weird about this!

Allen had been on the ropes ever since the start of this fight. The reason why he found this so unbelievable was because he was currently fully buffed from his cards. After suffering defeat after defeat at her hands, he had specifically changed out the collection of cards stored within his grimoire. He had replaced all Rank H cards with Rank G ones and, aside from stocking two Insect G and two Bird G for experimental purposes, filled all the remaining slots with Beast G for the Attack buff. He was now stronger than even a ten-year-old. In fact, Allen suspected that he currently matched a full-grown adult in strength. This was literally him going all out, and yet he was still losing against a three-year-old.

I can't hit her at all. Should I increase my Agility with Bird G? But if my Attack goes down any further, I won't be able to properly parry her strikes. Ugh, I don't have enough stat points to shuffle around!

Currently, Krena was superior in both Attack and Agility. Allen did his best to not get cornered by the innocent devil that he was facing.

"Playing with Allen really is more fun than with papa!" Krena cried as her free hand quivered with excitement. She apparently found Allen, who was the same size as her and fully buffed with his cards, the perfect partner for playing knights.

"Gee, thanks," Allen replied with a wry smile.

The play session had only just begun. The two continued for a whole hour with a few breaks interspersed within.

□□□

The nights for serfs came early, as the only source of light they had was from their fireplace. Around four in the afternoon, Rodin and Theresia were already back from the fields.

"Oh my, if it isn't Krena! Are you here to play with Allen again today?" Theresia asked, smiling warmly at the sight of the two children covered in dirt from head to toe.

"Mm-hm! I played knight with Allen!"

Allen looked both relieved and exhausted, indicating that the play session had just ended. He had remained on the defensive from start to finish.

"I'm glad to hear it," Theresia replied. "But it's about to get dark soon. Make sure you get home safe, all right?"

"Mm-hm! I'll be safe! See you tomorrow, Allen!" The girl who was still bursting with energy dashed off, her wooden sword still in hand.

Rodin, who through his talks with Gerda was mostly aware of what was happening, placed a sympathetic hand on Allen's shoulder. "Good work, son."

The family then bustled to prepare dinner. There was one thing that was now different about this scene.

“Here you go, papa,” Allen said as he dished out the fried beans. Ever since he turned three, he had started helping out with the housework. There was a good reason for this.

“Mm,” Rodin replied gruffly.

Theresia rubbed her son’s head. “What will we ever do without you, Allen?” she murmured thankfully before slowly and carefully settling herself into a chair. The bulge of her belly indicated that she was pregnant again. This second child—which she and Rodin had been wanting for a while now—was due around the turn of the year. Because she was already quite far into her pregnancy, Allen had decided to help out with the housework so as to lessen the burden on his mother.

During dinner, Allen suddenly said, “Papa, mama’s tummy is getting bigger, so I’ll help with harvesting the potatoes.”

He had seen Theresia having to suddenly stop and recollect herself several times over the past few days. Because he had the strength of an adult, he thought he could handle potato harvesting without issue. What’s more, even though he still had no intention of explaining everything about being a Summoner to his parents, he thought this a good occasion to reveal a bit of what he was capable of thanks to the buffs that the cards were giving him.

Rodin froze, looking shocked and at a loss for words.

Theresia joined the conversation. “Allen, honey, you’re still young. You can go ahead and keep playing with Krena!”

“That’s right, Allen,” Rodin added. “You helping out around the house is already more than enough. We will need your help with the fields in the future, but until then, play as much as you can.”

Back when Kenichi—Allen’s identity in his past life—had been a child, it had been his duty to clean the house’s bathtub. In his mind, he was pretty much equating this with helping out in the fields.

Rodin saw it differently, however. For him, working in the fields was hard labor, something that he did because it was his duty as a serf. It was not fun, nor was it something that a three-year-old could be expected to take part in. On a more fundamental level, he did not think being a serf was anything to be happy about either.

There was a large rift in the value system held by Allen and Rodin. Allen had now lived three years in this world, but before his reincarnation, he had lived thirty-five years as Kenichi. The value system and common sense from back then still strongly affected his thoughts and decisions now.

No dice, huh. Well, I am only three years old. Guess I’ll increase my daily training menu starting tomorrow, then.

Despite the difference in values, Allen could tell that there was no point in pushing the matter. He had offered because he preferred spending his time with his family if given the chance, but it was not as if he could not find other ways to utilize his time.

“Oh, do you want to hear what Krena did today?”

“Sure, honey. Tell us!”

Sensing that his offer to help with the harvesting had caused the air to grow a bit heavy, Allen decided to change the topic to a funny story about his play session with Krena that day.

□□□

October was nearing its end, signaled by the albaherons—the creature which Allen’s name was derived from—flying northward.

The harvesting is almost over. It’s completely hunting season now.

Ever since the start of the month, the men of the village had started getting together to go on hunts on days when they were all free. This year, they had already gone on two hunts in the midst of the potato harvesting period. Accordingly, Rodin had also gotten quite busy as of late. As someone with a burly 180-cm-tall body who had always dreamed of becoming a hunter, this was the time of the year that he always looked forward to the most. This year, he needed to work especially hard to ensure that Theresia, who was pregnant with their second child, got all the nutrition she needed.

Naturally, Gerda also participated in those hunts, so both Allen and Krena were growing up quickly and healthily. Everyone who participated in a hunt would gain a portion of the game’s meat. As the serfs’ diet was mainly composed of plant-based protein from sources like beans, the great boar meat served as a valuable source of animal protein. The hunting party had gotten so proficient now that they could normally manage ten to twelve hunts each year.

From January to March, the game of choice would shift to the white deer, a Rank C monster that looked more like an elk in spite of its name. However, it had white skin that camouflaged very well within the snowy landscape. As such, they were considered harder to hunt than the great boar.

Well then, how did my experiment turn out? Allen thought as he checked in on the Insect H that was currently inside a hole that he had made Beast G dig yesterday morning. “Oh, you’re still alive, Denka! This proves Summons can stay materialized for a whole day.”

This current experiment that Allen was conducting was meant to determine how long Summons could remain Summoned. This world had neither walkthrough sites nor online forums, meaning he had to figure everything out on his own. Now that he had been granted full permission to come and go inside his family’s front yard, he was taking the opportunity to test out a few things.

What Allen had just called out loud, “Denka,” was the nickname that he had assigned the grasshopper Insect H. It was possible to set names for each kind of Summon, and there was no change between using “Insect H” or “Denka” while Creating, Summoning, and Synthesizing. All of these Abilities could be performed silently, activating automatically as soon as Allen willed it.

Allen had assigned the following names to his available Summons:

Insect H: Denka (Grasshopper)
Insect G: Hopper (Frog)
Beast H: Mousey (Mouse)
Beast G: Moley (Mole)
Bird G: Chappy (Parrot)

These look more like names for pets than Summons, huh, Allen thought somewhat self-deprecatingly as he looked through the pages in the grimoire displaying the creatures' Statuses. He knew he could change the names as many times as he wanted, though, so he decided to leave them for now. *Well then, next thing.*

The little boy left the grasshopper in the hole and turned around to walk toward the tree growing in his yard. He gathered ten stones and placed them at his feet. Then he picked up each one in turn and threw them toward the tree.

If I remember right, the description for Hell Mode said, "The only Skills you start out with are the skills tied to your class." In my case, that would be Summoning. But that doesn't mean that I can't get other skills, right?

After throwing all ten stones, Allen retrieved them and added a stroke to the tally marks that he had been drawing on the ground. He then repeated the process over again.

For now, let's do a hundred throws every day. I wanna figure out the conditions for obtaining skills.

Allen was working hard at leveling Synthesis up, but there was little to it beyond expending his MP three times each day; this was not nearly enough for the hardcore gamer inside him. As early as possible, he wanted to figure out whether he could obtain skills unrelated to Summoning and, if so, what those conditions were. So he decided to use the rest of his time to experiment with gaining other skills as well.

In short, Allen was attempting to gain a skill similar to "Stone Throw." The stone throwing training regimen that he had taken up usually took him the entire morning to complete. One of the few advantages to having been reincarnated from birth was that he had all the time in the world to perform tedious trials like these.

□□□

"Let's play again tomorrow, Allen!"

"Sure thing."

Today's session of playing knight had just finished, leaving Allen thoroughly exhausted. Upon being prompted by Theresia, Krena sped off home, still filled with energy. It was dark there at night, as the roads that far out into the outskirts of the village were not lit. Traveling without clear visibility was dangerous, regardless of how energetic the little girl was, so Theresia always made sure to remind her to head off before the sun set.

If Krena keeps coming over every day like she's been doing, I just might gain a skill related to swordsmanship before stone throwing.

As always, Theresia's cooking graced that night's dinner table, and the family of three gathered around the sunken hearth. Serfs lived frugally and had few possessions, but that did not necessarily mean they ate poorly. Rodin, for example, had a 180-cm-tall, well-built body capable of performing manual labor from six in the morning to four in the afternoon, day in and day out. The amount of calories that he burned was significantly higher than that of the average person in the modern era.

That said, they had very limited access to ingredients like oil and meat, which meant the only way to ingest the amount of calories needed was through quantity. Their diet mainly consisted of potatoes, unleavened bread baked with wheat flour alone, beans, and a thin soup cooked with dried summer vegetables.

"You were throwing stones at that tree again today, weren't you, Allen?" Theresia suddenly asked. It was only natural for her to want to ask about this odd new behavior her son seemed to have taken up recently.

Allen simply nodded and said, "Mm-hm."

This prompted Rodin to join in the conversation. Theresia had told him about this before, and his curiosity was similarly piqued. "Why were you doing that?" he asked.

"You said there are monsters outside our house, papa. If they appear, I'll throw stones at them to protect mama!"

Allen delivered this answer that he had thought up ahead of time with the most childlike and endearing smile that he could muster. The reason his parents had kept giving him for not allowing him outside of the house was because "there are monsters outside," so he was using that to his advantage.

This frontier village was surrounded by a wall, and there were only very weak monsters nearby. However, there were times when a few of them would slip in through small cracks in the wall. While easily defeated in short order by guards or other adult villagers, the monsters' stats still made them a threat to children, especially the younger ones.

The weakest is a rabbit with a horn on its forehead, right? I still remember how delicious it was.

Rodin had managed to bring one of these home on two occasions. They had been the size of regular dogs from Allen's past life. Apparently there was an unwritten rule that these monster intruders belonged to whoever caught them, so there was always a scramble in the village any time one got in.

"Awww, Allen!" Theresia was so touched by his response that she reached over and wrapped her son in a tight hug.

"Is that so! Is that so!" Rodin joined in and tousled his son's hair, filled with pride at the courageous young man that his boy was growing into.

Theresia let go and looked into his face. "Of course, you'll be protecting Krena too, right?"

"Mm-hm!"

The truth was Rodin and Theresia had both heard from Gerda that Krena was already far stronger than horned rabbits. This was why it was her making the trip to their place every day instead of Allen.

“You’ve been having fun playing knight with Krena every day, so who knows? You just might have a Talent! I can’t wait to see the results of the Appraisal Ceremony when you turn five!”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll do fine, honey.”

Hold on, new word! What’s that? “Apprezelseremonie?”

“That’s right, Allen,” Theresia replied. “When you turn five, the gods are going to tell papa and mama whether you have a Talent or not.”

She continued to explain that in this world, all children who reached five years old had to undergo a ceremony that examined them for inborn Talents. Allen’s parents assured him that many people did not possess a Talent and to not get his hopes up, but to him, it looked more like his parents were the ones getting their hopes up. From the sound of it, possessing a Talent was one of the few ways through which a serf could rise through the social ranks.

And so the days passed with Allen continuing to throw stones in the morning and play knight with Krena in the afternoon. In addition to helping Theresia out where possible, he also diligently converted his MP into Skill XP and conducted further experiments during whatever time remained. Time flew by in the blink of an eye.

□□□

It was currently March, the time of the year when the last vestiges of snow melted away and green sprouts budded throughout the expansive fields. Allen, now four years old, was standing in front of the tree in his yard and staring at his grimoire. Specifically, he was staring at the line written in gold on the cover that represented his year and a half of unceasing effort.

`<Throwing has reached Lvl. 3.>`

It finally leveled up again!

Allen had successfully obtained Throwing as a skill and raised it to Lvl. 3. He updated the part of his memos where he had been recording the number of throws he had made.

```
Number of Throws Made (Cumulative):
10,000 times → Lvl. 1
20,000 times → Lvl. 2
120,000 times → Lvl. 3
```

Looks like there are certain rules behind obtaining skills. These specific numbers might be unique to Throwing, but they’re too perfect to be random.

Allen continued noting down what he could derive from these three numbers.

```
In order to obtain a skill, the associated action must be
repeated a certain number of times.
```

In order to reach Lvl. 2, the skill must be performed the same number of times required to obtain it in the first place.
In order to reach Lvl. 3, the skill must be performed ten times more than the number of times required to obtain it in the first place.

There was now a circular area on the surface of the tree that had been chipped away after being hit with rocks a total of 120,000 times. Allen had started out doing only a hundred throws each day, but when he reached Lvl. 2 and confirmed that the leveling system was, in fact, related to the number of repetitions, he had ramped it up to three hundred throws.

Which means if I'd been in Normal Mode and not Hell Mode, it would've taken only a hundred throws to get.

The description for Hell Mode had mentioned that gaining and leveling up skills would take a hundred times more effort. Allen concluded this was because the number of repeated actions required for both acquiring and leveling skills was literally a hundred times higher.

Hmm, do I actually want to aim for Throwing Lvl. 4? It'd presumably take a million throws. Three hundred throws a day means it'd take me over nine years. But even if I quit, it's not like I'd have anything else to do. Should I continue until something else comes up? If I do 100,000 or 200,000 more throws and the skill doesn't level up, then it'd support my theory that the needed XP is indeed one million.

While mulling over what direction to go next, Allen checked his Status.

Name: Allen
Age: 4
Class: Summoner
Level: 1
HP: 16 (40) + 26
MP: 1 (20)
Attack: 4 (10) + 26
Endurance: 4 (10) + 6
Agility: 10 (25) + 10
Intelligence: 12 (30) + 4
Luck: 10 (25)
Skills: Summoning {2}, Creation {3}, Synthesis {2}, Expansion {1}, Sword Mastery {2}, Throwing {3}, Deletion
XP: 0/1,000
Skill LevelsSummoning: 2
Creation: 3
Synthesis: 2
Skill ExperienceCreation: 1,846/100,000
Synthesis: 1,325/10,000

Creatable SummonsInsect: G, H
Beast: G, H
Bird: G
HolderInsect: G x 2, H x 2
Beast: G x 13
Bird: G x 2

Although Summoning rose to Lvl. 2 when Allen was a year and ten months old, it had not gone up since despite him now being four years and five months old. He had only been able to start training Creation Lvl. 2 and Synthesis Lvl. 1 after he turned three and his max MP increased to six. By now, however, both these skills had gone up by a level each.

So why didn't Summoning increase to Lvl. 3 even though Creation leveled up?

As Allen studied his status, this familiar train of thought—one he had wrestled with countless times—rose unbidden to his conscious mind. He speculated that, because Summoning had yet to level up, no new available Summons had appeared. Considering how Bird G unlocked when he obtained Summoning Lvl. 2, he would likely need higher Summoning skill to gain access to higher-ranked Summons.

The problem is, I have no idea how to raise my Summoning skill.

This world had neither walkthrough sites nor online forums, meaning Allen had to figure everything out on his own. After racking his brains, he had decided to try raising Synthesis to Lvl. 3. He was hoping that raising both associated skills to Lvl. 3 would naturally cause Summoning to also become Lvl. 3.

Despite having leveled up, Synthesis still cost 5 MP to activate. It seemed likely that this was going to remain a fixed number unaffected by skill level, unlike Creation.

As for Sword Mastery, it had gone up naturally through playing knight with Krena daily. After a year and a half, it had now become Lvl. 2.

Allen had noticed this with Throwing as well, but having a skill—and what's more, having it at a higher level—made a significant difference in accuracy and power. Skills corrected the user's form so that the associated motion would become smoother and more natural. The power of the stones he threw and the sword strikes that he dealt had both increased with each successive level up. Although there were elements that made this world seem like a swords-and-magic video game, it was still very much real. There were no visible damage counters, so Allen had no way of knowing for sure, but he could feel the damage he was dishing out had indeed risen.

Accordingly, Allen had noted in his grimoire.

Effects of Leveling Up:
Corrects the body's posture
Increases the damage dealt

“Allen, can you help me with lunch?” Theresia suddenly called out.

“Of course, mama.” Allen obediently headed back into the house. He walked up to stand next to his mother, who was shouldering a toddler, and helped out where he could with the cooking.

In December of the year before last, Theresia had safely given birth to her second child. The fifteen-month-old baby was now flapping his legs vigorously, indicating that he was awake.

While handing cooked potatoes and the pestle and mortar to Allen, Theresia slowly rocked him back and said in a sing-song voice, “Mash, yum-yums will be ready soon!”

“Yaaah!” the baby replied in a drawn-out voice as saliva dribbled from his mouth. Allen’s younger brother Mash had brown hair, green eyes, and features that seemed closer to Rodin’s rather than Theresia’s.

Once again, Rodin had been the one to decide the child’s name, and he had done so basing it on another monster. His inspiration had been the murdergalsh, a creature that he described as “a lone wolf that roams the world wherever it pleases.” He had put plenty of thought into the name, and his earnest hope for his son to grow up free and unshackled came through crystal clear. But in the same way Allen’s name was supposedly derived from “albaheron,” Mash’s name bore little resemblance to “murdergalsh” either.

When Allen asked, he learned that the murdergalsh was a Rank B monster, two whole ranks higher than the albaheron. Hearing this, he turned away and muttered under his breath in a silly, villain-like voice, “Like hell a younger brother can surpass his older brother!” before chuckling a bit to himself.

Since Mash was currently being weaned, Allen diligently and thoroughly crushed the potato into a paste that his baby brother could safely eat without choking. Although he had yet to help out in the fields, he had become quite involved with the housework by now.

Here’s to hoping you eat more and grow up big and strong, little brother.

“I’m home!” Rodin was back from the fields, so the entire family gathered around the sunken fireplace to eat lunch. Halfway through the meal, Rodin shared, “Oh, yeah, they’re naming the village ‘Deboji Village’ next year. When I went to the well to refill our water jug this morning, some of the villagers told me a messenger from the feudal lord came and announced it.”

Theresia did not look particularly surprised. “So our village is finally getting a name…”

I guess we’re developed enough to no longer be “just a frontier village,” Allen thought.

This year was the ninth year since the village’s founding. Both its expansion and production had largely evened out, so for its tenth anniversary, it was to be officially named.

“Yep. Makes sense that it’s the village chief’s name. No surprises there,” Rodin chuckled.

Oh? Our village chief’s name is Deboji, huh? Wonder what he looks like. Allen recalled how Rodin had explained before that most frontier villages were named after the most famous person of the village. Normally, this was the first-generation village chief.

After he finished lunch, Rodin said, “Well, I’ll get back to it,” and stood up. Before he actually went back outside, though, he made sure to plant a kiss on Theresia’s cheek. Back when Mash was still an infant, Theresia had to stay with him all day long, but now she could step out during his afternoon nap to help Rodin out a bit in the fields.

Watching his mother playfully smack his father in response, Allen thought, *What a peaceful family.* He turned toward his younger brother, who was struggling to feed himself some mashed potatoes with a wooden spoon but was ending up with most of it on his face. *Mash, it looks like we might be getting another sibling soon.*

A recurring thought popped up in Allen’s mind then: why had he been reincarnated?

In his previous life, he had wished from the bottom of his heart for a game challenging enough that he could really dig his teeth into it. Due to this, he did not regret having come to this world of swords and magic. Although his parents in his previous life were still alive, he was already thirty-five and had no girlfriend or spouse. He figured that the overall impact of his coming here was quite minimal.

However, during his first year or so in this world, he had wished that he had been reincarnated as an adult from the get-go instead of starting all the way from birth. That way, he could have lived a life unbeholden to anyone and focused solely on his progress as a Summoner. Immediately upon arriving here, he could have headed to the nearest town and registered as an adventurer, then dedicated himself to increasing his levels and skills through hunting monsters. His playstyle had always been to constantly seek out the most powerful equipment and max out his levels as quickly as possible, and he had originally intended on doing the same thing here.

But a family’s pretty nice too. At the very least, I should free them all from serfdom. Though I still don’t really know how to do that.

Now that he had a younger sibling, there was more for him to consider. He had goals aside from simply leveling up.

Chapter 4: The Appraisal Ceremony

Five and a half years had passed since Allen was first born into this world. It was now spring and halfway through April. Today, Theresia and Rodin had been quite restless ever since the morning.

“Don’t make trouble for the father, okay?”

“I understand, mama.”

This exchange had already taken place more than ten times since yesterday. Allen stood patiently as his mother brushed dust off his outfit again.

“Theresia, Allen’s a smart kid. You know he wouldn’t do anything he shouldn’t. It’s time. We’re off.”

Today was the day of Allen’s Appraisal Ceremony.

My parents sure are gung-ho about this, he thought as he reflected over what he had been told the past few days.

The Appraisal Ceremony was an occasion to appraise each individual for their innate Talent, if they had one at all. It was law in this kingdom that everyone, from royalty to serfs, must undertake this ceremony when they reached five years of age. Depending on the Talent, the child could be promised a government job in the future, regardless of social class. This was one of the few ways for serfs to escape their lowly station.

Allen found himself making his way to the center of the frontier village. It was just him and Rodin; Theresia had stayed behind to take care of Mash. As his father led him down the farm road, Allen heard a very familiar voice.

“Alleeeen!” Krena shouted, energetically waving her arm as her pink hair fluttered in the wind.

Thinking about how long it had been since he last saw her without a wooden sword, Allen replied, “Hey, Krena. You’re going to the Appraisal Ceremony too?”

“Mm-hm! I’m gonna get Swordswoman! And then I’m gonna become a knight!” Krena replied with a bright smile.

Krena was also going to take part in the ceremony today. It was held only once annually in April for all the children that turned five within the year. The Church was hardly going to make the arrangements again and again for each child’s birthday.

Beside Krena was the burly Gerda. The two families began walking together as a group of four. Before long, they had left the fields behind and arrived at the area of the village packed with buildings. Along the way, Krena went into detail about her dream of becoming a knight, practically repeating word for word what she had told Allen yesterday and the day before.

Even after Allen was born, the population of this village had continued rising. By now, the village center was quite well-developed. The last time Allen had been here was when Rodin brought him to watch a great boar

butchering when he was one year old. Back then there were only a handful of buildings, the memory of which proved a sharp contrast to the current state of the village.

The ceremony would be starting at 9 a.m. Although it was still a bit early, there was already a crowd of nearly a hundred in front of the building that was very clearly the church. What Allen first noticed about the people was the cleanliness of their clothing. Although everyone was wearing hemp, there were some—serfs—with conspicuous brown stains on their clothes, presumably from working frequently in the fields and having no easy access to soap. The stains served as a conspicuous visual mark of the difference in accessibility to various resources between social classes.

Whoa, the difference between commoners and serfs is that obvious, huh? Wait, so the commoners are appraised together with the serfs?

When the nine o'clock bell clanged, the large double doors opened and clergymen emerged, wearing full-body robes of matching design.

This is gonna be my first time entering the church, Allen thought as he and his father were guided inside by the clergy.

The exterior appearance of the building seemed to imply that there were two floors, but it turned out to be a single floor with a vaulted ceiling. At the far end, pure white statues—both male and female, similar in style to the ones made of Greek mythological figures—towered over all who drew near. There was little doubt that these were representations of this world's deities.

Let me guess, this one's holding what looks like a rice plant, so he's probably the God of Bountiful Harvest. And that one is holding a weapon, so…Goddess of War, I'd guess. But the one standing in the middle and farthest in the back…that's definitely the God of Creation.

The statue of Elmea depicted him as a man in his late twenties with waist-length hair, a toned build, and fair features. Both of his eyes were closed and the top half of his body was bare. None of the deities had wings. Allen thought back to when he turned one and received a message from Elmea through his grimoire. He had not received any other contact since.

The group of parents and children were instructed to sit together in a group on the ground. When they were all settled, the one who appeared to be the most senior clergyman came forward.

"Thank you all for gathering today for the Appraisal Ceremony."

The serfs started when all the commoners bowed their heads, then quickly mimicked what they saw. The commoners apparently visited the church frequently—at least, enough to have a basic grasp of the etiquette involved. Of course, Allen obediently followed suit as well.

The senior clergyman continued, "Elmea, the God of Creation, grants opportunity equally to all. Those of you born as serfs might not be as familiar with the stories, but there are those of your status who have gone on to become champions of our country."

The villagers stirred, buzzing with amazement at this claim. Many of the parents present today were hearing this for the first time, as they were here with their first child to reach five years of age.

The village itself had been founded ten years ago. The first two to three years saw rather meager harvests, which made it difficult to survive, much less consider children. By the fourth year, however, the development of the village had gradually gotten on track and the crop yields started stabilizing. Thanks to this, the families finally had the leeway to start having children. Rodin and Theresia were part of this group. In other words, the thirty or so children here, including Allen, made up the village's first baby boom.

"As examples, Clasys the Saintess was born as a commoner. Dverg the Sword Lord, who is actively serving our kingdom even today, was born as a serf."

As the clergyman's voice reverberated through the room, the villagers became increasingly astonished, their murmurs buzzing louder in turn.

Ahh, I get it now.

Among the crowd, Allen was the only one who actually understood what the clergyman was saying. He thought back to when he was still choosing his preferences for this "game" on his computer. When he selected classes with lots of stars, such as Hero or Sword Lord, the game restricted the social classes that he could become to the lower strata. The setup was such that class and social class were inversely correlated. It was therefore impossible for powerful classes to be born from royalty or upper nobility.

Which means that what I saw as settings for character selection are the actual foundations of this world. So that's why the people here are so thorough about testing even the serfs for Talents, which I assume refers to the job classes. So that no Talent-holder goes undiscovered.

As the senior clergyman went on to give a simple rundown of the Appraisal Ceremony, other clergy members carried over a crystal and set it up in front of him. The children were to place their hands on this crystal, after which the results of their appraisal would display on the pitch-black surface of a 170-cm-tall metallic panel that stood next to the clergyman.

Hmm, so the crystal won't change colors or glow? The results of the appraisal will just show u— Wait, so it'll be all public? Well, I guess there's no hiding the results, not in front of this many people.

Soon enough, the Appraisal Ceremony began.

"Pelomas, son of Deboji. Step forward and place your hands on the crystal," the senior clergyman said in a sonorous tone, reading from a parchment that likely contained the list of the names of all thirty or so children present.

The village chief Deboji led his son forward and brought him before the crystal. Upon being prompted again by the clergyman, the little boy laid both his hands on the ball. It emanated a faint glow that was sucked toward the metallic panel, which then displayed silver-colored lines of text.

Hold on a moment! So, it basically works like how my grimoire does?! Does that mean the function of the Appraisal Ceremony was just incorporated into my grimoire automatically?

"Wonderful! You have the Talent of a Merchant. Congratulations."

```
Name: Pelomas
HP: C
MP: D
Attack: D
Endurance: C
Agility: D
Intelligence: B
Luck: B
Talent: Merchant
```

The village chief whooped with delight as he saw the Talent and threw his arms around his son, squeezing him fiercely. Pelomas also looked happy, albeit a bit smothered.

Is Deboji happy about Merchant specifically, or is he just happy that his son had a Talent at all? And the stats are displayed as ranks. I see.

Allen called out his grimoire and noted down the results of Pelomas's appraisal. Another commoner boy was called up next. His father also brought him forward, and he placed his hands over the crystal.

Once again, silver text appeared on the metallic panel. The Talent field said "None," causing the father's shoulders to slump in disappointment. However, he then simply withdrew with no attempt to protest the result, as if understanding that the reading was absolute.

The appraisals continued. After Pelomas, most of the other children were Talentless and had stats that only went up to C at most. Because the senior clergyman was calling the commoners first, the serfs were still waiting. Those who had already been appraised were free to either return home or stay behind to watch the other children's results.

"I did it, papa! I got Ax User! It says I'm an Ax User!"

The seventh child, a stocky little boy, rejoiced with his father when the clergyman informed them of his Talent.

```
Name: Dogora
HP: B
MP: D
Attack: A
Endurance: B
Agility: C
Intelligence: D
```

Luck: C
Talent: Ax User

Wow! That's the first time an "A" has shown up in anybody's Status. And he has a Talent! That can't be a coincidence. Does this mean those without Talents naturally have lower stats? Just as he had done for all the others, Allen copied down this boy's Status into the grimoire, jotting down his thoughts in the margins.

It was not long before the senior clergyman had finished appraising the commoner children and moved on to calling the serfs. Most of them also turned out to be Talentless. When one child was pronounced to be a Cleric, the clergyman told both the child and parent to stay behind afterward.

I still haven't been called... Not that I mind—I'm glad I've got the chance to survey such a large sample of Statuses.

As it turned out, Krena and Allen were the last two children. While the majority had already left, a handful of families stood in the back of the chamber, having chosen to stay behind out of curiosity.

"Krena, daughter of Gerda. Step forward and place your hands on the crystal."

"Okay!" The pink-haired girl approached the crystal, led by her father. She placed both hands onto it, beaming.

That instant, the crystal lit up far brighter than it had all day. The clergy and remaining parents all jolted in surprise. Even Gerda's face was filled with astonishment.

When the light subsided, the metallic plate displayed the results of Krena's appraisal. The senior clergyman started trembling like a leaf as he fell into an even greater shock, stuttering, "I-It appeared! I can't believe it!"

"What is it?! Father, what does it say?!" Gerda asked pressingly. Like most serfs, he did not know how to read or write aside from the names of his family members. Everything on the metallic panel was gibberish to him aside from "Krena."

"S-Sword Lord! Your daughter's Talent is Sword Lord!"

Name: Krena
HP: S
MP: C
Attack: S
Endurance: A
Agility: A
Intelligence: C
Luck: B
Talent: Sword Lord

"Did he just say 'Sword Lord'?!"

“A Sword Lord has been born!”

The inside of the church immediately fell into an uproar. Everyone kept exchanging looks between Krena and her appraisal results.

The girl herself, however, looked both disappointed and confused. “I’m not a Swordswoman?” she asked, her head tilted.

The pitch-black surface now displayed the words “Sword Lord” and stats that were head and shoulders beyond that of any other child so far, all in brilliant silver letters.

Both Gerda and Rodin were entirely petrified, seemingly having trouble processing the revelation. Allen was the only person still calm, occupied with recording his childhood friend’s Status into his grimoire.

I had a hunch this was how it’d end up. Honestly, there was no way she was just a Swordswoman—not with her laughably overwhelming strength.

It had been two and a half years since Krena and Allen started playing knight together. Although they did so for only an hour each day, it had still been enough to raise Allen’s Sword Mastery to Lvl. 3. The number of wooden swords that had been snapped now numbered more than ten. As such, he had taken to making his own wooden swords as of late.

After the appraisal was done for all thirty-one children, the final tally was as follows:

```
1 x Sword Lord (Krena)
1 x Ax User (commoner)
1 x Cleric (serf)
1 x Merchant (village chief’s son)
27 x Talentless
```

If I’m to make an educated guess from this sample, it means the large majority of people in this world are Talentless. Only roughly one out of every ten actually possesses a Talent.

“Lastly, Allen, son of Rodin. Step forward and place your hands on the crystal.”

Finally, it was Allen’s turn to be appraised. Rodin brought him before the crystal.

My parents will learn about me being a Summoner after this. Before, there was no way for me to explain to them even if I wanted to, so this makes for a perfect opportunity.

During the past five and a half years, even after Theresia had reduced countless Denkas into bubbles of lights, Allen had not told his parents that he was a Summoner. One reason was because he had no answer if his parents asked how he knew of his own class. Moreover, he had no need to run the risk of explaining himself.

When Allen’s hands got close to the crystal, it practically exploded in light.

“WHAT?!”

Once again, everyone reacted with complete surprise. The light was even greater than during Krena’s turn. It shone like a small sun, prompting several to throw up a hand over their eyes.

When the light faded, silver letters appeared on the black metallic panel.

“Th-This is...but...” The senior clergyman rubbed his eyes as if doubting what he was seeing.

Rodin, who could not read, asked apprehensively, “Um, Father, what is the result?”

“Huh? Oh, um... I’m sorry, your son is Talentless.”

“I...see...”

Rodin had watched Allen and Krena play knight many times before. The way his son handled his wooden sword was completely different from what other children the same age could do. This had given Rodin the expectation that Allen was a Swordsman.

Looks like my father’s disappointed about the result. I don’t really mind being “Talentless” all that much, but what I wanna know is what the heck is actually going on with my reading?! Was the God of Creation slacking off?!

Allen stared at the metallic panel, somewhat incredulous.

```
Name: Allen
HP: E
MP: E
Attack: E
Endurance: E
Agility: E
Intelligence: E
Luck: E
Talent: å□¬å—šå£«
```

Why is the text in my Talent field all garbled?!

The silver text on the jet-black panel showed all of Allen’s stats as “E” and his Talent as unintelligible gibberish. The senior clergyman had likely declared him Talentless because the text did not mean anything.

There were a few commoners present who could read. Allen’s stats, when considered together with his lack of Talent, set off a wave of murmurs discussing how “pitiful” his Status was. Rodin, who seemed to have heard all those whispers, looked at his son with a face filled with shock.

“Ahem. Rodin, do not forget that Allen is still your precious child. Raise him well.”

When the clergyman in charge of keeping records of all the Status readings finished writing down Allen’s as well, the letters on the metallic panel disappeared.

Although the Appraisal Ceremony was already over, it was still before noon. Rodin left the church with Allen, his shoulders slumped as they started for home. Gerda and Krena quickly followed after them, the church staff making no move to stop them. Just like everyone else, they were apparently free to go. While on the road back, Gerda did his best to cheer Rodin up, but he was largely unresponsive to his efforts.

They let Krena go just like that? After all the fuss they made about her being a Sword Lord? Ah, no, they'll probably come talk to her again another day, I imagine.

Because Allen's head had been bowed the entire way, Rodin assumed he was depressed. When Gerda and Krena parted with them and he was finally alone with Allen, he turned to him and said, "Allen, you are my son. Don't worry—I *will* raise you with everything I've got. However, mama will worry, so let's still let her know what the father said, okay?"

"Wha—?" Allen looked up, then pulled a smile. "Oh, of course, papa." Indeed he had been engrossed with his thoughts, but it was not from being depressed. He was simply preoccupied with analyzing all the new information that he had added to his grimoire this morning.

Rodin patted his head a few times before the pair continued home, walking in silence. When they got home, they shared the news with Theresia, who gently stroked Allen's head and reassured him that he was still her child, just as Rodin had done.

Allen then headed into the nursery for his afternoon nap. He lay down next to his two-year-old brother, Mash, who was breathing peacefully in sleep. Their bare-bones wooden cot had been replaced with a proper bed. His parents' warmth filled his heart.

Just before he allowed himself to fall asleep, however, Allen wanted to go over everything he learned from today's Appraisal Ceremony and properly write down all the conclusions he could deduce.

I mean, this has got to be a mistake by some god or person in charge, right? The fact that my Talent was in garbled text must mean they either forgot or hadn't gotten around to making sure that my class shows up properly when appraised.

I do feel bad seeing how worried my parents had been for me today, but since the Ceremony officially declared me "Talentless," I guess I should probably continue keeping the fact of me being a Summoner a secret. That means skilling up out of my parents' and Mash's sight, same as before.

Once Allen finished deciding on the direction he would take his training going forward, he turned to another page in his grimoire that he had filled out a while ago.

On a different note, the fact that all my stats came out as "E" confirms something that I've suspected all along.

During the past five or so years, there was one burning question that Allen had desperately wanted to know. And today, he finally got his answer thanks to what he learned at the Appraisal Ceremony. While all his stats

being “E” may have disappointed his parents, it was not necessarily all that bad an outcome for him.

Allen looked at the corner on the page where he had written:

```
Hell Mode and Normal Mode:
Hypothesis 1: Everyone in this world is in Hell Mode.
Hypothesis 2: I am the only one in Hell Mode, and everyone else
in this world is in Normal Mode.
```

Allen erased his first hypothesis. I finally got the confirmation I’d been wanting so badly. That’s the only way to explain why I got “E” for everything.

Within the past few hours, Allen had largely finished analyzing the Appraisal Ceremony. First, he concluded that the ranking displayed for each stat was more of an indication of potential. With everyone being five years old, there shouldn’t have been that great a difference between the actual stat values between all the children. Chances were that most of them were, just like Allen, still only Lvl. 1. As such, the rankings were likely either an indication of how much a stat would increase upon leveling up or of the maximum value a stat could cap out at.

In light of this, Allen’s stats all being “E” was a strong indication that he was the only person in Hell Mode. The reason they were ranked so low was likely because both the potential and rate of growth were being considered, and he, being in Hell Mode, would be improving at a rate a hundred times slower than everyone else in this world.

In his past life, Kenichi had lamented how modern games had shifted toward undemanding gameplay. After being reincarnated into this world as Allen, he was the only person in Hell Mode. Some would consider this a hellish situation to be in, but the emotion that Allen felt welling up inside his heart was something else entirely. He felt as if he had discovered a goal to strive toward.

“I see, so this new life of mine is itself an act of defiance against hopelessly easy games. I’ll live my life to prove the worth of games with actual challenge!”

Allen finally went to sleep, slightly embarrassed that he had gotten so excited he spoke his thoughts out loud.

Later when 3 p.m. rolled around, he played knight with Krena as usual. However, that was not all that happened that day. Around dusk, Allen’s parents said they had business to take care of and left the house. Theresia came back not long after, but Rodin did not return until an hour later.

“Huh? Wait, what happened, Rodin?!” Theresia exclaimed in shock when she saw the bruises all over her husband’s body. His face was swollen where it looked like he had taken several punches. However, he said nothing and simply kept his head down.

Three days passed with Theresia repeatedly questioning Rodin after the bruises and him continuing to stay mum with a sullen face. On the fourth day, the answer came through Krena. As it turned out, he had gotten into a

fight with Gerda. She did not fully understand the reason for the fight, but considering how it had happened on the same day after the Appraisal Ceremony, Allen suspected that it had something to do with himself being Talentless and all his stats being “E.”

Allen had been sending telepathic messages to the gods requesting clarification and rectification in regards to his appraisal results every single day since the Ceremony. He did so clutching his grimoire, but had yet to receive an answer, glowing page or otherwise. However, back when he had been Kenichi, he had once lost a piece of equipment he had spent a whole year crafting due to a server crash, something that was inarguably the game company’s fault. After that, he spammed the management staff on a daily basis until they finally used backup data to restore his item. In the same vein, Allen intended on praying to the gods every single day until they responded.

“Allen, are you ready?”

“Yes, mama.”

There was not really all that much to do in preparation, so Allen just grabbed his wooden sword. In a flash of self-awareness, he realized that he had picked up a weird habit from Krena.

“Come on, honey, you’re coming too. I know you’ve been awake for quite a while already. Stop pretending to be asleep!” Theresia barked, holding Mash with one hand and tugging at Rodin with the other. Apparently her husband was still feeling sullen.

Currently, their family was just about to head over to Krena’s house. They were going to have dinner together, so Theresia grabbed a basket filled with ingredients before they set off.

It’s been so long since I last visited Krena’s place.

It was now five and a half years since Allen had been born into this world. He had started playing frequently with Krena after turning three, but she was the one who came over almost every single time. As such, he had had very few opportunities visiting her house.

Around fifteen minutes later, Allen’s family reached their destination. They found a woman with short, curly pink hair and blue eyes waiting for them. When she spotted them, she said in an energetic voice, “There you are!”

“Mathilda, I’m so sorry for all the trouble that Rodin caused you the other day.”

“Oh, hey, don’t worry about it! Gerda’s also old enough to have known better.”

This woman who spoke in the tone of a reliable older sister was Mathilda, Krena’s mother. She led Allen’s family inside her house. They were going to be staying over for the night.

As soon as they stepped inside, Krena bounced out and said, “Welcome, Allen!” This was the first time Allen’s entire family had come over, so she was even more excited than usual.

There was an area with an earthen floor, an inner space with a sunken fireplace, and two rooms. The layout of the place was practically identical to Allen's house.

"Seriously, how much longer do you plan on sulking for?! And you've been awake for the past while, haven't you?!" Mathilda exclaimed as she used one hand to drag Gerda's bear-like body out from their bedroom. His face was also covered with bruises, just like Rodin's.

After that, Theresia and Mathilda worked together to prepare dinner. During that time, Krena brought her younger sister out. "Allen, Allen! Look! Lily is so big!" she cried.

Just like Krena, Lily had also ended up inheriting Mathilda's pink hair—instead of Gerda's brown hair—and blue eyes. The baby babbled happily and reached out with both hands, making grabbing motions.

Oh damn, I feel so at peace just watching her!

Lily was still only a year and a half old. Although Allen had not had that many opportunities to see her in person so far, he had already heard plenty of stories from Krena.

Soon enough, dinner was done and everyone gathered around the sunken fireplace. The fare was nothing fancy—it was the usual beans, potatoes, unleavened wheat bread, and vegetable soup with a few chunks of meat.

It feels like the birthday party that my classmate in kindergarten invited me to.

The house was not large, and so the two families had to sit close together in order to fit around the fireplace. However, none of them was bothered by it. In fact, there was a certain warmth to it.

"Want a cup?" Gerda asked while casually bringing out what looked like an earthenware jar.

"Huh?!" Rodin replied in a slightly belligerent tone, but still held out his empty wooden cup. After Gerda finished filling it up, he brought it back close and sniffed it. "Wine?"

"Mm-hm."

"What's this out of the blue?"

Wine was a resource that serfs had extremely limited access to. The last time Rodin had some was when he got married to Theresia.

"The village chief came yesterday and left it."

Rodin frowned. Although he said nothing, it was clear that he had understood a lot from Gerda's short utterance. Gerda proceeded to go into detail regarding what had happened during the past three days as he downed cup after cup. The village chief had visited, with the wine in hand, to inform Gerda and Mathilda that he was setting off to inform their feudal lord about Krena and that consequently, she might have to stay in their feudal lord's city going forward.

The sight of Rodin's face gradually deepening into a scowl as he continued giving his account prompted Gerda to say, "Come on, man. The

village chief brought some wine to show he cares and all that now that Krena's a Sword Lord. You know how he is. No big deal, right? Don't sweat the small stuff, man."

"I'm not bothered about that. In fact, I'm glad for you, I really am. Never mind government service, she might even rise to become a noble. And by extension, so would your whole family."

As it turned out, Rodin was not jealous of Krena being a Sword Lord.

"Then why did you suggest breaking off our relationship?!" Gerda howled in an increasingly loud voice. "UP TILL NOW, WE—!"

He was cut short, however, by a perfectly placed punch that landed square on his face, courtesy of Mathilda. She did not want him shouting in front of the children.

After a heavy silence, Rodin replied, "If you keep associating with us, you might lose your chance at becoming nobility."

Rodin kept his voice quiet, likely out of fear for Mathilda's fist. More than half of the bruises on Rodin and Gerda's faces had actually been dealt by Mathilda when she stepped in to break up their fight.

By now, it was clear what had set off this fight between the two men. In this world, only serfs could marry serfs. Commoners could only marry commoners. And of course, nobles could only marry nobles. The reason for the fight was not, as Allen had guessed, because of him being Talentless and having low stats.

Forget Swordswoman; Krena had turned out to be a *Sword Lord*. This was a Talent that contained the potential for her to easily exceed the status of being a royal knight and even become a champion of the people. This was such monumental news that the village chief was going to inform their feudal lord two days later in person.

In light of this, Rodin had suggested to Gerda that their two families stopped associating with each other. Gerda's response had been his fist, and the rest was not hard to imagine.

I see, so it was both of them trying to be considerate of the other but being too boxed into their own points of view. Should I try to prod them?

"Um, is it true that all four of you came to this village together?"

Everyone's attention turned toward Allen with his innocent smile as he broached a topic that he had heard from Rodin before.

"That's right, Allen," Mathilda answered. "We came here together from the neighboring village. We've been together ever since we were young, just like how you and Krena are."

She continued sharing how they had all been born as serfs and played together in their childhood. As serfs, they were naturally poor, but life was good. Gerda and Rodin listened in silence.

Ten years ago, a messenger from their feudal lord visited the village where they were living, proclaiming news of a new frontier village that was being founded. Anyone who came and properly contributed to the expansion

efforts would be granted permission to continue using their assigned plot of land indefinitely.

“Back then, we got together to talk it over, just like we’re doing now,” Theresia murmured, ruminating over the memories of the past that surfaced in her mind.

It was true that serfs could not own land, but cases of the land they were working suddenly being seized were very rare. That said, it was usually only the eldest child that succeeded the land. Rodin, Gerda, Theresia, and Mathilda all had older siblings.

The tax for serfs was six-tenths of their harvest. How many people helped with the harvest did not matter. And because the size of the land itself remained the same, the amount of food that it could produce was fixed. If the family working it had children and the children grew up, this single piece of land would become incapable of keeping everyone’s bellies full. This was why these four decided to join the new village and secure their own land.

Gerda nodded with a wistful face. “When we first arrived here, there was nothing at all. So we worked together to build our two houses.”

This was the reason why the interior layout of both houses looked the same. They started off building only the earthen area and the large room with the sunken fireplace for each other. Later on, when they decided to have children, both houses got two more additional rooms.

“We sure went through a lot…” Rodin trailed off and closed his eyes, falling silent. He was reliving the memories of his childhood and of all the difficulties he had overcome when he first came to this frontier village.

The topic of their past and their shared troubles seemed to have succeeded in restoring the relationship between the two men. The fire flickered as the adults talked late into the night.

Chapter 5: Krena vs. Vice-Captain of the Knights

Three months had passed since the Appraisal Ceremony, and it was now July. No word had come from the feudal lord during this time. Allen's family spending the night seemed to have done the trick in helping Rodin and Gerda reconcile. According to Theresia, the two of them getting into spats had been a pretty common occurrence ever since their childhood.

Summers here at this frontier village were hot, with the temperatures easily climbing above thirty degrees. Allen was careful to make Mash drink water frequently so that he would not get dehydrated. Now that he had turned two, he was capable of walking and followed Allen everywhere. Once he turned three, he would also be granted permission to go out into the garden.

Not much had changed with Allen's training menu or his Status. He was close to reaching Synthesis Lvl. 3, but because he had to Create two cards first before being able to Synthesize them, it was taking quite a while. Sword Mastery was, of course, still at Lvl. 3. Leveling up in Hell Mode was no walk in the park.

"Allen, are you ready?"

"Yes, mama."

Today was a big day—an order of knights would be visiting the village. Rather than summon Krena, the feudal lord had chosen to dispatch his knights to call on her instead. A herald had arrived a few days ago to inform the village chief, who had in turn visited Gerda's house the next day to pass along the message that he was to bring Krena to the residential area that day.

The order of knights, huh. The authorities who rule this fiefdom. They're practically gods in the eyes of us serfs. I hope they won't cut people down just for meeting their gaze...

Although it had been Krena and Gerda who had been summoned, Rodin wanted to be there as well. He wanted to witness, in person, the moment that his childhood friend obtained success beyond his social class. And in turn, Gerda had also invited him to come.

"All right, we're off, Theresia."

Once again, Theresia was staying home to take care of Mash. It was too important an occasion to bring him along, as he might get startled by the horses or large crowd and start crying.

Soon, Rodin and Allen reached Gerda's house. The large man and his daughter were both standing outside waiting. Mathilda was next to them with Lily in her arms.

The instant Krena caught sight of Allen, she started waving her arm vigorously. "Alleeennnn!" she cried in a loud voice.

She looks so happy today. Not that I don't understand how she's feeling.

For almost three years now they had continued to play knight. Every single one of those days, Krena had introduced herself as "Krena the knight." Today, finally, she was going to meet real ones. Her excitement was palpable.

"I'm gonna become a knight today!"

"Ha ha ha," Gerda chuckled, ruffling Krena's hair. "We'll still have to ask, all right? It's not confirmed yet."

Ah, I bet the two of them have been like this the entire day.

The group of four—Mathilda was also staying behind to look after Lily—struck off together. Krena talked nonstop until the residential area eventually came into view.

"Where're we supposed to go?" Rodin asked.

"Deboji said the square," Gerda replied.

"The square? Not his house or the gate?"

By the time they arrived, there was already a whole crowd gathered in the center of the residential area where the square was located. Murmurs of "the Sword Lord's here!" rippled through the crowd like waves as people parted to make way. Apparently they had all gathered after hearing that the knightly order would be coming today. In a rare change of pace, the majority of the attention was not on Allen for having black hair and eyes.

No one approached Krena and Gerda. The general mood in the air was to simply await the knights' arrival.

Hold on, we're going to have to wait over two whole hours? Great, I've got nothing to do, so...might as well nap.

Allen started dozing off, not caring in the slightest about any looks directed his way. For him, this was the same thing as sleeping while riding the bullet train or on a plane. As a general rule, when he had nothing to do, he would sleep. And because he did so, Krena leaned against him and started nodding off as well.

Eventually, the bell clanged again, signaling noon. This incredibly loud noise—due to how close it was—caused both children to jolt awake.

"Bwuh?!"

"Hey there, sleepyhead. Looks like they're here," Rodin said in response to Allen's sleepy gasp. The knights had arrived at twelve o'clock on the dot.

Oh? Are they already within sight? I can't see from this position...

The villagers buzzed with conversation. During the time Allen had been asleep, the crowd had grown significantly larger. There were even quite a number of serfs who usually never came to this part of the village.

Before long, the clip-clop of horse hooves rang out.

They really are here! They seriously came all the way to this frontier village. How far away is the feudal lord's city anyway?

The order of knights soon came into view. Clearly it was not the entire order, as there were only ten or so knights, all mounted on horses. Their

small number made sense, as they were only here to see Krena, not to fight against some terrifying enemy.

The village chief patiently stood in front of the crowd. Soon enough, the man who appeared to be the leader of the knights stopped in front of him. Allen could not hear what was being said, but judging by the village chief's body language, he was probably welcoming the knights to the village. He then pointed toward Krena.

The knights' leader removed his helmet—as did the rest of the knights a beat later—and looked directly at the pink-haired girl. She returned their gazes with glittering eyes, already wide awake.

The village chief beckoned with his hands, as if asking Krena to approach. Gerda looked at Rodin, who nodded back. It was time to meet the knights. Gerda walked forward, pulling his daughter along. Rodin and Allen stayed where they were and just watched.

Are the knights going to bring her back with them? It's a bit strange thinking that I won't have an afternoon nap buddy or a partner to play knight with anymore.

Allen stared at his childhood friend, feeling somewhat melancholic while also wishing her the best. Although she was now a fair distance away, her energetic "I'm Krena!" could be heard all the way back where he stood. The brawny Gerda was acting meek as a mouse. It looked like he chastised his daughter for being too loud.

The knights' leader, who had a strapping body himself, stroked his mustache while talking with Gerda. As Allen watched on, however, Gerda jerked backwards in surprise and shouted, "What?! That's unreasonable, m'lord!"

The conversation seemed to have taken a worrying turn. In order to hear what they were saying, Allen decided to get closer, weaving between the villagers who had started whispering furiously to one another in response to this unexpected development.

Gerda seemed to be in the middle of desperately making a case for something. "—rd, Krena is still a five-year-old child who has never held a real sword before. She ca—"

"Enough. She is a Sword Lord, is she not? Then there should be no issue. Or was the report of her Talent falsified?"

"N-No, m'lord, she *was* declared a Sword Lord at the Ceremony. But fighting against an actual kni—"

"Vice-Captain Leibrand, into position," the company leader barked toward a subordinate who had already dismounted, uninterested in listening to Gerda's impassioned pleas any longer.

"Yes, Captain!"

The other knights moved their horses to the edge of the square. The village chief was quite flustered, not knowing what was going on, but complied with the order to show the knights to the village stable.

“Please, m’lord, Krena will die! Please show mercy!” Gerda fell to his knees and bowed so low he literally planted his face into the ground.

“It appears that you still don’t get it, so I will put it simply: *anyone* who submits a false reading from the Appraisal Ceremony will receive the death penalty. In this case, it would be both you and your daughter. If she does not fight against my subordinate right here and now, we will cut the both of you down for the crime of fraudulent Talent declaration. Make your choice.”

Gerda fell silent, despair emanating from his every pore. He watched as another knight drew a sword and handed it to his daughter. The naked blade, which resembled a medieval longsword, was double-edged and nearly as long as Krena was tall.

Are these guys serious?! That’s ridiculous! What’s going on here? Did the knights plan on doing this from the start? Is that why they designated the square as the meeting point?

As Allen finally understood the situation and furiously racked his brains for a solution, Krena adorably asked, “If I beat Mr. Knight, do I get to become a knight too?”

The knight captain looked surprised, then replied, “I…suppose if you can beat him, the path toward becoming a knight yourself would be opened, yes.”

“Okay!”

The pink-haired girl was the only person who was smiling at the moment. She stared at the very first real sword she had ever held with sparkling eyes.

The rest of the knights returned and proceeded to herd the gathered villagers backwards to create enough space for Krena and the vice-captain to fight in.

“Please, m’lords, we beg your mercy!”

Gerda could not help but beg for leniency once again, but he was summarily escorted to the edge of the square, with one knight even standing guard next to him.

“Enough, I said. Dverg the Sword Lord defeated a red dragon by himself when he was but ten years old. Your daughter is already five, is she not?” The captain’s point was that Krena should already be more than capable of fighting.

Allen and Rodin hurried to where Gerda was.

Is this really happening?! This has turned into one hot mess!

Even Allen had no idea what to do. He was equally powerless against the knights himself, being only Lvl. 1 and having Summoning only at Lvl. 2. He would not last a second in a direct fight.

Krena and Vice-Captain Leibrand both moved to the center of the impromptu ring, facing each other with swords readied. Whereas the former was a little girl barely over a meter tall clad in little more than rags, the latter was a fully armored man almost twice her height. Their difference in

power was plain to see. The villagers all cast pitying looks toward Krena from where they stood at the edge of the square.

Despite the situation, Krena looked entirely unfazed. There was not a shred of worry on her face. Rather, it was as if she thought this was a game. Just as she always did, she named herself out loud using the line that Allen had heard more than a thousand times.

“I am Krena the knight! Let us fight with honor!”

The knight paused briefly, then replied, “I am Sir Leibrand the knight. Come at me.”

There was no referee or starting signal. The battle had already begun. Krena charged forward like how she always did when playing with Allen. She lifted the heavy metal sword as if it was nothing and brought it down in a flash. There was no hesitation whatsoever in her movements, despite this being her first time wielding a sword with a real edge.

The knight parried her attack with his own weapon, causing a loud metallic clash.

Considering how my Sword Mastery is Lvl. 3, Krena’s is probably Lvl. 5, right?

If Allen really was the only person in this world who was in Hell Mode, then the math could be done to figure out Krena’s skill level. Almost all her training had been with Allen, so he could assume the amount of Skill XP she gained was similar to his own. And because he had to earn a hundred times more Skill XP to level up, and because the amount of Skill XP required to level up a skill would go up by a factor of ten for each successive level, it meant Krena’s Sword Mastery should have been higher than his by two.

Even as Allen continued his analysis, Krena and the knight continued slashing at each other furiously, every attack powerful enough to be lethal. The air of the square was filled with the cacophonous clangs of metal on metal.

Most of the villagers had expected Krena to be killed as soon as the fight began. However, she had grown so much from the three years of “playing knight” that she apparently had the ability to stand her ground against a fully trained knight.

The knight captain watched silently with his arms crossed, his face unreadable. Several minutes and dozens of clashes later, the fight that had seemed equal up until now saw a sudden development.

“Kuh!” The air left Krena’s lungs as Leibrand’s armored foot landed squarely on her abdomen. There was no rule that they could only use their swords. The perfectly timed attack sent the girl flying through the air and crashing against a building. She crumpled to the ground, her head bowed. The wall had been made of solid wood, and yet the force of the impact had still left very conspicuous cracks on its surface.

“KRENA!!!” Allen yelled. He and Gerda tried to dash forward to help, but the knights closest to them wrestled them to the ground.

It really was too much for her! She is still only Lvl. 1 while that knight must have way more skills and experience from years of service. There was no hope of winning from the very start. What should I do?!

"What is—?! Stay still, kid!"

"Let me go, you asshole!"

Unfortunately, the man holding Allen down was far stronger than he was. The boy strained to get up, but could not budge an inch. There was no way for him to get free.

Leibrand stood still, choosing not to pursue Krena and deliver a finishing blow. The entire crowd's eyes were on the limp figure of the girl. Seeing as how the knight had kicked with his full strength using an armored boot, many villagers even suspected that Krena was dead.

The knight captain closed his eyes and sighed heavily. "She couldn't do th— Hm?"

Just when everyone thought it was all over, Krena slowly rose to her feet, still looking downward. The sword in her hand—which she had not let go of despite being sent flying—came back up as she adopted a fighting stance. Allen watched her with trepidation from his position on the ground.

Leibrand also raised his sword once more. However, he showed no intention of charging forward. Just as before, he was clearly waiting for Krena to attack him.

Krena's head shot up. She and Leibrand stared straight into each other's eyes for a while. As the villagers watched nervously, wondering if she was going to continue fighting, Krena suddenly shouted, "RAAHH!" That moment, the cracked wall behind her exploded into smithereens as an aura exploded from her body, enveloping her in a shimmering contour that looked like a heat haze.

Wait, what?!

In the same breath, Krena charged forward once again. She leaped high up into the air and rotated furiously to add centrifugal force to her swing before bringing her sword down. The powerful attack descended upon Leibrand's head like a flash of lightning.

“Ugh!”

The knight needed to use both hands to block the slash, but the shock of the impact still ran through his body. The attack was so powerful that his feet sank slightly into the hardened dirt ground of the square.

“HAAAAHHH!”

Leibrand also let out a battle cry as the exchange of swords resumed. Sparks exploded in bursts again and again, vivid even under the blazing sun. However, things were clearly different from before. With every blow, the knight lost ground. He stepped back once, twice, thrice, unable to withstand the shock of the blows being meted out. No longer was the fight evenly matched. Even the villagers, most of whom knew nothing about sword fighting, could tell that he was being backed onto the ropes. Krena was swinging her weapon with unbelievable strength and speed, as if the hunk of metal as long as she was tall was but a mere twig.

What? What’s going on?! Wait, could this be…an Extra Skill?

Allen found a possible answer to what he was witnessing within his memories. Back when he had been selecting the settings for the “game” that was this world, he had read in the description for Normal Mode that it included “the opportunity to roll for one Extra Skill.” He now suspected this condition was the same for the residents of this world.

Sword Mastery is just a Normal Skill that even I was able to acquire. Krena must have been born with an Extra Skill that complements her class as a Sword Lord.

The difference in strength between Krena and Leibrand was so significant that Allen had regained the calmness to resume analyzing the situation. Krena losing no longer seemed even possible now. The grip of the knights holding Allen and Gerda down loosened as they, too, looked on with slack-jawed astonishment, forgetting themselves.

“HYAAAHHH!!!” Krena swung her sword horizontally.

CLANG!

A disbelieving “N-No way!” escaped Leibrand’s lips as he stared at what was now the remaining half of his sword. The broken-off blade flew through the air then pierced the ground. However, the knight quickly regained himself and lifted his broken sword to prepare for the next incoming attack.

“STOP! Both sides, lower your weapons!” the captain of the knights shouted.

“Whaaat?” Krena asked in an unsatisfied tone, as if she had not had enough. “No more?”

“That’s right. The fight is over.”

The girl’s shoulders slumped a little, but then she picked herself back up. She trotted over to Leibrand and bobbed her head. “Thank you very much! You’re very strong, old Mr. Knight!”

Leibrand replied with a stiff face, “I-I’m not that ol—”

He never got to finish his sentence, however, as his hips suddenly gave way and his knees hit the ground.

“What?! You there, take care of the vice-captain!” the captain barked with urgency. After all, it was unbecoming for a knight to be kneeling in front of so many commoners and serfs—after having lost to a five-year-old girl, no less. Two other knights lent Leibrand their shoulders and helped him up, carrying him off somewhere. The way they were supporting him indicated that he could no longer even stand by himself. When he passed by, the captain gave him a few pats on the shoulder as if to say, “Well done.”

Krena approached the captain, still holding her sword. The man stiffened slightly as if in wariness.

“Thank you very much! It was fun!”

“Hm— Huh?!”

When the knight captain accepted the sword that Krena was returning, his brows shot up incredulously. The steel blade was squashed flat and its edge was badly chipped in more places than could be counted. Even more surprising was the handle. Although this was also made of steel, there were now ripples on its surface as if it was a stick of modeling clay with the imprint of a child’s hand. The knight could not even imagine just how powerful Krena’s grip had been. A chill went down his back as he handed the weapon that could no longer be sheathed to a subordinate.

“Sh-She really is a Sword Lord…”

“The rumors were true! She defeated a knight!”

“Her swings were so fast I couldn’t even see the blade!”

The villagers were in a complete uproar after having beheld such an unforgettable spectacle. This day, more than two hundred people bore witness to a fight that started seemingly for no reason and ended with Krena’s indisputable victory.

□ □ □

When he was freed, Gerda immediately rushed over to Krena to check if she was hurt anywhere. She had just clashed swords what looked like over a hundred times with a full-grown adult. It would not have been strange at all for her to have taken at least a few slashes. What’s more, she had taken the full brunt of Vice-Captain Leibrand’s kick and had been sent flying dozens of meters into a wall. As it turned out, however, she was entirely unhurt—she did not have even a single bruise on her body. She giggled ticklishly under Gerda’s worried fussing. Final damage tally: slightly dirtier clothes. That was it.

Has she always been this tough? Wait a sec, has she ever gotten hurt during our “play knight” sessions?

Every once in a while, Allen had had no choice but to block Krena’s swings with his arms or legs. Whenever that happened, he would end up with painful-looking bruises. Now that he thought about it, however, he realized that he could not recall a single time that Krena had ever been injured.

“Well done developing her abilities as a Sword Lord this far. That was impressive,” the captain of the order said as he approached, calmly offering Gerda a hand. The truth, however, was that another chill had just run down his back when he overheard how Krena was entirely unhurt. The contrast to Leibrand, who could no longer even stand and had to be carried out of the square, was stark.

Gerda looked up warily. Understandably so, as his daughter had just been forced to fight for her life out of the blue. Thankfully, she had won, but one wrong step and she might have died.

The knight captain kept his hand extended as if he wanted Gerda to take it as an indication of his forgiveness. Gerda’s face was all red from bottled-up rage—he had always had a short fuse, so much so that it was almost always he who threw the first punch whenever he and Rodin fought. However, he understood that the difference between his social status and that of the knight captain was like heaven and earth. His precious child, his close friend, and his friend’s child were all there with him. He did his best to suppress his anger and reverently accepted the proffered hand.

Clink.

Gerda started and looked up. Something had been placed into his hand. The sensation as well as the glitter he noticed through his fingers told him it was three gold coins; he had been handed money under the guise of a handshake. Despite being surprised, he managed to pull his hand back in a natural way without saying anything.

The captain turned to Deboji as if nothing had happened and asked, “So then, is there somewhere we can sit down and talk?” This was apparently him showing consideration to Gerda by giving him time to put the money away before the large number of surrounding villagers noticed.

“Y-Yes, milord. A feast is being prepared in your honor at my house.”

“Much appreciated. As for you, your name is Gerda, yes? Can I expect you and your daughter to be in attendance as well?”

“Wh— Um, uh…yes, m’lord.”

Noticing the look that Gerda shot toward Rodin, the knight captain said, “Ah, if you wish, your friend may also join us.”

Allen suspected that the knight captain was actively trying to get Gerda to lower his guard. Rodin nodded at Gerda as Krena invited Allen to come along as well. Just as the four of them were about to head to Deboji’s house together, however, it was revealed that the preparations for the feast would not be finished until around 3 p.m. Therefore, Rodin decided to head back to update Mathilda and Theresia, leaving Allen to stay with Gerda and Krena.

With nothing else better to do, the three went for a walk together. Everything was a new sight for Allen, who was seeing the residential area of the village practically for the first time ever.

This place is huge. The square just now could fit a hundred people easily. By my estimate, this village has a population of, say, three hundred?

As this was the heart of the village, there were quite a few shops lined up. Allen's eyes were naturally drawn toward what appeared to be a commercial district.

Is that a weapons shop? And I spy plants inside of that place, is it a general store? Or a drug store?

It was not all that far from the square to the village chief's residence. Allen's first impression upon laying eyes on it was that it was massive. It seemed roughly the size of two stand-alone houses from modern Japan. Due to having lived the past several years in little better than a shack, he could not help but be overwhelmed by the sight.

When they knocked on the door, they were shown to a room where they could wait.

Because the knightly order arrived pretty much right on time, I guess we can expect the feast to start between 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. Oh, it's time to do my Creation and Synthesis.

A quick look at his grimoire showed Allen that his MP had topped back up. It did not matter that Rodin and Krena were also there with him, as they could see neither the tome nor the cards. He proceeded to convert his MP into Skill XP.

This was part of the daily routine he had been maintaining ever since he turned one year old. At first, he only managed to do it twice per day on average, but now he could maintain a steady schedule of both Creating and Synthesizing three times a day. He understood that the only way toward power was through diligent and unceasing effort.

After finishing within a few moments, he looked up to study the room he was in.

Looks like commoners really do have a much higher standard of living. Then again, maybe the village chief's house isn't the most accurate representation.

Soon Allen found himself with nothing to do once more. Just as he was thinking how much the trope of pastimes such as reversi becoming popular in otherworlds now made sense, he felt a wave of drowsiness wash over him. And of course, once he fell asleep, Krena followed suit, leaning against him. Gerda looked over them with a soft gaze, smiling wryly at how much the two of them slept.

□ □ □

"Allen, wake up. It's starting."

"P-Papa…?" Allen looked around, rubbing his eyes, and found Rodin looking down at him. Two hours had passed.

Allen and Krena roused themselves, then headed with Rodin and Gerda toward the large room where the feast was being held. The closer they drew, the clearer they could hear the hubbub, indicating that there was already a sizable crowd. True enough, when they stepped inside, they found not only the knights, but also quite a few other villagers and their children present. They were wearing fine clothes, indicating that they were likely

important people in the village. As it turned out, this banquet was not just for the knights, the village chief, and Gerda's group alone.

Hey, that's the village chief's son. And that other one…what was his name again? He's the one who's an Ax User, right?

Allen looked around curiously as his group sat down at the table they were escorted to. Sharing the table with them was the knight captain, the village chief, a woman who seemed to be his wife, the village chief's son, the Ax User boy, and a man who was likely his father. Of the three tables in total, this one was at the most honorable position at the front of the room. The remaining two tables were occupied by the other knights and villagers.

Since the Sword Lord had arrived, the feast could finally kick off. After the village chief gave his welcoming speech, the knight captain also stood up to offer a few words of commendation for the progress of the village's development. However, none of the words entered Allen's ears.

They're serving molmo?! I've got to bring tw— no, three of them home for mama!

Both Krena and Allen had noticed that one of the plates on the table was loaded with molmo, a fruit they both loved. Allen made up his mind to nab some, if the opportunity arose, to bring home with him.

The knight captain was eating quite heartily, probably due to having grown hungry from the long trip. The oppressive aura that he had been emanating at the square had dissipated without a trace. Leibrand was not present at this feast. It was not clear if it was because he had not yet recovered enough to eat or if he was feeling awkward about having fought Krena.

The mood surrounding the knightly order has changed completely. Is this because now they know for sure that Krena is a Sword Lord? Would they really have killed her if she wasn't?

As the conversation flowed, the knight captain suddenly turned to the village chief. "I said this before, but you've really done a good job with this village, Deboji. Things have changed quite a lot since my last visit three years ago."

"Th-Thank you, milord. Everyone in the village has been contributing however they can," Deboji replied, bobbing his head repeatedly.

Funny how he himself is kinda chubby while his son looks so gangly, Allen thought idly. I guess those genes didn't get passed down.

"In light of all the effort you have dedicated over the past ten years, it's a bit difficult for me to say this, but…"

"O-Of course, milord," Deboji stuttered, anxiety clouding his face. "You can tell me anything."

The knight lowered his head apologetically and said, "His Lordship said that if Krena was indeed proven to be a Sword Lord, this village will be named after her instead of you."

"I'm sorry, milord?"

In most cases, a newly founded frontier village would be named after the person who “contributed the most to the development of the village.” In most cases, this would be the village chief by default. Previously, there was talk that the same would be true here.

The captain seems a lot more humble now than my first impression of him. Was he acting out there in the square earlier?

“I-I see. We shall comply with His Lordship’s decision, of course.”

Deboji did not attempt to protest the announcement. Or rather, it was more correct to say that he knew that nothing would change even if he did attempt to protest.

Ahh, so our feudal lord wants to make this “the village where Krena the Sword Lord was born.”

The meal had only just started, but it seemed the knight wanted to get this news off his chest as soon as possible. As the conversation went on, more and more dishes kept being carried in. It was the first “proper” meal that Allen had had since coming to this world. He hungrily shoveled down all the dishes that were not just blandly roasted or boiled. Whenever no one was watching, he tucked a molmo under his seat.

“There’s one more thing I ought to say,” the knight captain continued, turning toward Gerda. “I sincerely apologize for springing the fight on the Sword Lord so suddenly just now. His Lordship is somewhat sensitive to this matter as of late, though it isn’t particularly his fault.”

“I...see?”

Apparently the knight intended to properly explain the backstory for the fight with Leibrand in the square, also stressing to Deboji that this was something he needed to know. Rodin and Gerda gave him their undivided attention as the village chief indicated that he was all ears.

“The truth is, there was an incident three years ago involving the son of a count who was said to be a Sword Lord.”

A Sword Lord born to a count? Hold on, didn’t Sword Lords only go up to baron? Allen thought back to the character selection options that he had seen in his old world. He recalled checking the social classes available for Sword Lord and seeing only serf, commoner, and baron.

The knight captain continued his story. The boy was lauded as a Sword Lord and, when he came of age, was accepted into service by the royal family. He did indeed have a strong build and impressive proficiency with the sword. However, at a moment when he needed to activate his true power as a Sword Lord, what he managed was underwhelming, to put it mildly. There was at the time another Sword Lord in active service to the kingdom named Dverg, and the difference in strength between the two was like night and day.

“I see...” Gerda mumbled in response to show he was listening, but not fully understanding where the story was going.

“So then they re-appraised the boy. As it turns out, he was just a Swordsman, not a Sword Lord. The revelation was so shocking that many

other nobles and their children were forced to be appraised once more. This revealed that there was a rather significant percentage who had been falsifying their Talents. Some were Talentless but claimed a Talent, whereas others had claimed a stronger Talent than their own, such as Mages claiming to be Archwizards and, well, Swordsmen claiming to be Sword Lords. The kingdom fell into a huge uproar."

I see, so there were a large number of nobles embellishing their Talents.

"His Majesty the King was furious at this and penalized all the offenders. The count who had passed his son off as a Sword Lord was stripped of his title and his land. And so that is why, this time, I was ordered to come and confirm Krena's abilities in person. Our review of the records of the Church had largely convinced us that there was no fraud involved in this instance, but we still had to be sure."

The appearance of a Sword Lord in the fief was a matter that necessitated a report to the royal family. However, it was just recently that punitive action had been taken against some of the most prominent members of nobility due to false reports of the exact same thing. The records from the Church gave credence to this particular claim, but this proved insufficient for allaying the feudal lord's worries. As such, he had deployed his order of knights to come investigate.

This explanation was actually far more than serfs had any right to expect in this world. The captain had meant it partly as an apology toward Gerda and Krena for testing them.

Everyone turned to look at Krena. She was currently focused solely on gorging herself with all the dishes that she had never seen before. It was clear that not a single word of what the knight just said had entered her ears.

Deboji cleared his throat. As the representative of the others, he said, "Thank you for sharing the circumstances of the situation with us, milord."

The knight captain nodded. "Make sure that the results of next year's Appraisal Ceremony are also reported without falsehood or inaccuracies. We would hate to have to punish you after all the work you did in this village. That said, we want accurate, undoctored reports whenever any issues or problems arise as well. Otherwise, we will be unable to provide you the support you require."

A short while later, as this topic seemed about over, Gerda asked, "Um, m'lord, what will become of Krena going forward?" He wanted to know what she would have to do—or what he had to do for her—now that she was officially acknowledged as a Sword Lord.

"For now, simply raise her with love and care," the knight replied, shooting a glance at the girl in question, who was still packing food away at an unbelievable speed.

"O-Of course, m'lord."

“When she reaches twelve, however, she is to attend the Academy to gain an education. After she graduates, barring any unforeseen issues, she will likely be entering the direct service of the royal family.”

Whoa, there’s an academy!

“The royal family?!”

What Allen reacted to was the mention of a school, but what everyone else, including the village chief, reacted to was the mention of the royal family. Serving the royal family was an incredible honor, needless to say.

Gerda murmured pensively, “The Academy…”

“That’s right. Have you heard of Academy City before? It’s a place that cultivates Talented children and helps them develop their abilities.”

The knight captain also noted that attendance normally cost tuition, but because Krena was a Sword Lord, the feudal lord would be paying on her behalf.

“Can I become a knight if I go to school?!”

“Wha—?! Shush, Dogora! Don’t interrupt them!”

It was Dogora, the Ax User child, who had suddenly cut into the conversation, his eyes dazzling. He had a rather stocky build and a bumpkin face.

“Hm? Who is this child?” the knight captain asked.

“I’m sorry, m’lord!” Dogora’s father replied. “This is my son, Dogora. He is an Ax User by Talent and has always dreamed of becoming a knight.”

Although he was apologizing, he was still promoting his son as best he could. Of course, the only reason why he got himself at this table was to directly appeal to the captain of the knights.

“An Ax User, you say? Our order is currently most in want of Spear Users, but we still value Ax Users. If he manages to score highly on the Academy’s entrance exam, we shall support part of the cost of his tuition.”

Hmm, spears over axes. And he’s willing to provide financial aid.

Allen was surprised to hear that this world had a system similar to scholarships. However, it was easy to imagine that this likely came with the caveat that Dogora would be bound in service to the feudal lord after his graduation, at least until he could pay off the loan.

Dogora was just glad that he got a positive answer. He clenched a fist and shouted, “Awesome!”

The knight captain smiled and nodded, then said, “This will be a ways off still, but in order to ensure that Krena does not fail the entrance exam, I will make arrangements to send a tutor to this village. Make sure to study properly. And Dogora, if you are aiming to become a knight, then you should study together with Krena.”

“Thanks!”

Oh, so just having a Talent doesn’t guarantee enrollment.

The knight captain clarified that the tutor’s top priority would still be to help Krena pass, and that Dogora would be allowed to join the lessons only if doing so did not negatively affect Krena’s studies.

Dogora's father kept knuckling his son's head as if trying to drill into him to speak more respectfully. Still, he looked extremely happy while talking with the knight captain about the possibility of his son entering government service.

"Will you be studying too, Allen?" Krena asked all of a sudden.

"Hm?"

"What?! Black Hair is Talentless! Why does he get to study?! Weaklings can't become knights!"

"Allen is super strong too! He always plays knight with me!"

"No way! I heard he has no Talent and his stats are super low! Like poop!"

"Nuh-uh! Allen is super, duper strong! And he knows everything!"

Krena, stop pouring oil on the fire!

The more Dogora bad-mouthed Allen, the more Krena puffed her cheeks in anger. Their exchange quickly turned into a shouting match, drawing the attention of the adults nearby. Then everyone's gaze turned toward Allen, who had been simply eating and doing his best to maintain a low profile.

"Speaking of which, who is this black-haired child?" the knight captain asked. Although he did think the black hair and eyes a strange characteristic, he had not broached the subject earlier as he could not imagine him being more important than a Sword Lord.

"M'lord, he is my child," Rodin responded with a bow. This was the first time he had joined in the conversation, despite it having been some time since the feast had started.

When the knight captain asked who he was, Gerda introduced him, saying, "This is my friend Rodin, m'lord."

The knight looked up to the side as if attempting to recall something, then started. "Are you perhaps Rodin the Boar Hunter?"

Oh? He knows of my father? More importantly, my father has an alias?!

The knight captain's attention shifted from the black-haired child to his father.

"Ah, yes, m'lord. That's me."

The knight captain's attitude switched in an instant. "Oh! Please accept my sincere apologies. Why did you not name yourself earlier? Here I was, about to leave without knowing that I had shared a table with the champion of the village!"

"Um, you know of me, m'lord?"

"Of course I do! His Lordship has also praised you before. Increasing the food supply is one of the most pressing challenges facing this fiefdom. He was rejoicing at how a steady supply of great boar meat had suddenly appeared after this village was established and the fields were expanded."

Every year, processed meat would make its way from the frontier village to the feudal lord's city. The knight happily shared how the arrival of this meat had become so significant to the city that it was now said to be the herald of winter.

A single great boar yielded more than a tonne of edible meat. The frontier village alone could not consume even half of the meat that came from the hunts, and therefore would send a large portion to the feudal lord’s city. The several tonnes of meat had become a precious winter provision for the city as well.

“And when we looked into it, we discovered that the hunting effort was led by two men by the names of Rodin and Gerda. Absolutely remarkable! And these are not words from me. Take them as praise from His Lordship himself.”

Although it did not seem as if the knight captain would be directly rewarding Rodin, he did commend him in a loud voice that echoed throughout the room. The rest of the villagers had heard it clearly.

“Th-Thank you, m’lord.” Rodin appeared overcome with emotion, as though he felt like his years of effort had finally been acknowledged. Allen found himself feeling as proud as if he was the one being praised instead.

After that, the feast ended without anything else of note happening, and everyone turned homeward. Allen was cradling four molmo within his clothes. His step was a bit lighter than when he left, bouncing with the burning desire to tell Theresia about how Rodin had been praised in front of everyone.

Chapter 6: Incident

Roughly two months after the knightly order's visit, Theresia became pregnant once again. According to the village midwife, the birth would take place next year. Because of this, Rodin was back to working the fields by himself.

Theresia insisted on naming this third child, as Allen and Mash had both been named by Rodin. However, because she and Rodin had agreed that he would get to name all the boys and she would get to name all the girls, Rodin simply replied, "Sure, if it's a girl." Apparently, he had every intention of naming the child after another monster if it turned out to be a boy.

Today, Allen was sitting in the garden, his back leaned against the tree with a circle of peeled bark on its trunk. His grimoire was floating before him, golden text gracing its front cover.

<The Skill XP of Synthesis has reached 10,000/10,000. Synthesis has reached Lvl. 3. Summoning has reached Lvl. 3. Expansion has reached Lvl. 2. You have obtained Strengthening. You have 1 new message.>

"I've done it... I'VE DONE IT! Summoning finally leveled up again! That took absolute *ages*! And...whoa, this is a lot of information. What should I start with?"

The moment Synthesis reached Lvl. 3, a whole bunch of lines had flowed by in the log.

It sure took a while. How long has it been since I started leveling Synthesis up? Hmm...damn, a year and eleven months.

Every single day, Allen had poured all his MP into using the Creation and Synthesis skills. Because it took six hours for his MP to recover, he did three sets every day—four on the rare occasions when time allowed. Finally, all that effort had paid off.

There was plenty that piqued Allen's interest in the lines of text, but of course, it only made sense to first check his Status. He opened up his grimoire to the first two pages.

Name: Allen
Age: 5
Class: Summoner
Level: 1
HP: 20 (40) + 26
MP: 0 (20)
Attack: 5 (10) + 26
Endurance: 5 (10) + 6
Agility: 12 (25) + 10
Intelligence: 15 (30) + 4

Luck: 12 (25)
Skills: Summoning {3}, Creation {3}, Synthesis {3}, Strengthening {1}, Expansion {2}, Deletion, Sword Mastery {3}, Throwing {3}
XP: 0/1,000
Skill LevelsSummoning: 3
Creation: 3
Synthesis: 3
Strengthening: 1
Skill ExperienceCreation: 8,786/100,000
Synthesis: 0/100,000
Strengthening: 0/1,000
Creatable SummonsInsect: F, G, H
Beast: F, G, H
Bird: F, G
???: F
HolderInsect: G x 2, H x 2
Beast: G x 13
Bird: G x 2
???:

Nice, I got a new skill! And just as I thought, I now have access to Summons that're Rank F. And just like with Bird G, this "???" is probably gonna stay hidden until I figure out what to put together to Synthesize it, right? I wonder what it is! Dragons would be good. Come on, I want dragons! Summon: Divine Dragon!

Allen had gotten a bit overexcited from the level up. He took a deep breath to calm himself down and turned his attention toward the next bit to confirm.

I just used up all my MP, so I'll have to check out the Rank F Summons later. Seeing the time now...it'll be after dinner, then. Okay, next thing.

The pages turned rapidly according to Allen's will.

Heck yeah, more slots to store cards in!

Each level of Expansion gave Allen ten more card holders in the grimoire. Now that it was Lvl. 2, he could store a total of thirty cards. Thanks to this, the number of buffs he could receive from the cards had just gone up significantly.

Hmm, looks like that's all I can check out at the moment. Last is this message from the gods. It's been a while since the last one.

There was a single glowing page at the back of the grimoire. Apparently, the complaints Allen had continuously lodged through prayer every day had paid off.

Are they finally apologizing? Let's take a look.

Dear Mr. Allen,

Thank you very much for your continued usage of our services.

Please allow us to first offer our sincerest apologies for the incident where the Appraisal system failed to display your class properly. Additionally, we also apologize for the delay in this reply.

We have taken measures to remedy the issue. Going forward, “Summoner” will be correctly displayed in the Talent field whenever you are Appraised. We have also informed the Pope of the addition of this new class through a prophecy. No further details about your class were revealed in conformity with our general policy of not disclosing details about any class.

Next, please allow us to respond to the matter of all of your stats being appraised as “E.”

As you surely already know, this reading is indeed derived from assessing both a stat’s potential ceiling and expected rate of growth. Residents of this world are not informed when they level up—a phenomenon they colloquially refer to as “overcoming a Trial of the Gods.” As such, modes (i.e., the concept of varying degrees of difficulty in leveling up) are also not common knowledge.

Due to there being no change in the assessment criteria behind the rankings assigned to each stat, your readings will remain as “E” going forward. We ask for your kind understanding.

However, we understand that it would be unfair for you to be the only person unaware of the growth potential of your stats. As such, we are including below what your readings would be if rate of growth is not considered. Additionally, we have added this information to a Memo page so that you can refer to it even after this message disappears. Kindly note that these values are independent of the buffs you receive from your Summons.

```
Name: Allen
HP: A
MP: S
Attack: C
Endurance: C
Agility: A
Intelligence: S
Luck: A
Talent: Summoner
```

All of our staff here in the Divine Realm will continue to apply ourselves to the improvement of our service. We kindly ask for your continued patronage.

Lastly, we believe this to be sufficient by way of an apology and expression of sincerity. Please refrain from sending us further claims of a similar nature.

Sincerely yours,
Elmea, God of Creation

When Allen finished reading to the very end, the words on the page faded away. As promised, the growth potential of his stats had indeed been added to a page in the Memo section.

Hmm, looks like the five months of persistent praying for improvement haven't been for nothing. So, all my stats are still going to be "E" when I get Appraised again. What is this mention about a prophecy? It's my first time hearing mention of anything of the sort.

When Allen had been Kenichi and had lost his equipment in a game, the management staff had also sent him a similarly polite and long-winded message. However, despite the courteous response that he received this time, he knew better than to abuse the same tactic. After all, he was now dealing with gods, not just a game service provider. For all he knew, they might just erase his existence if he pushed too far.

Looks like my stats are basically Krena's re-shuffled for a support build. The number of S, A, B, and C rankings is the same as her Sword Lord class.

Allen compared the page showing his own Status with the page where he had recorded Krena's during the Appraisal Ceremony. He had confirmed before coming to this world that the Sword Lord class had three stars. From this, he drew the conclusion that his own class could perform at least as well as a three-star class even without all the buffs from the cards.

And leveling up is described as "overcoming a Trial of the Gods," hmm.

Just once before, Allen had asked Rodin about the experience of leveling up, assuming that he must have leveled up before from all the great boar hunts he had been a part of. The answer that Rodin gave was something along the lines of, "Yep, I got stronger when I overcame a Trial of the Gods."

With this, Allen's analysis of his Status was largely over. The next thing was to test out Strengthening and check out the new Summons, but it would have to wait until after dinner, when his MP would be back to full.

□□□

After dinner, Allen cleared away the table and washed up so that his pregnant mother could rest. Then Mash approached him, asking, "A'en, play w' me?" so he played with him for about thirty minutes until Mash tired out and fell asleep. Only after Allen tucked him into bed did he finally have time to himself.

To start, he planned on testing Strengthening out before it got completely dark.

As soon as Allen chanted, "*Strengthen!*" inside his mind, a line of silver text appeared on the cover of his grimoire.

`<Which card do you wish to Strengthen?>`

Oh? It didn't say, "You do not have enough MP." I had half-expected it to tell me I couldn't use the skill yet, just like last time.

Allen recalled the time when he first obtained Synthesis and had to wait until he turned three years old in order to have enough MP to actually use the skill.

Well, here goes. Insect H: Strengthen!

One Insect H card floated out of its slot. It stopped before Allen's eyes, then started shining with a golden light.

Woowwww! Allen almost exclaimed out loud from excitement, but he managed to clap his hands over his mouth in the nick of time. When the light subsided, the card was now a different color.

Let's see. Whoa! The blank parts in the illustration on the card are all shiny now!

The negative space around the depiction of Denka that used to be plain white was now a dazzling gold. Right below, a new line of text had been added.

<Endurance + 10, Agility + 10>

I see, so this skill makes the Summons themselves more powerful. My class isn't just about using the higher-ranked Summons, then.

Appearance-wise, however, nothing seemed different about the grasshopper in the illustration.

Wait, would this affect Denka's size? Hmm, let's try Summoning it. Summon: Denka!

The Strengthened Insect H appeared in a faint burst of light.

"Ahh, so the size doesn't change, but it does glow to indicate that it's been Strengthened!"

"Gosh, Allen, Mash, go to sle— Hm?"

"Urk!"

Apparently, Theresia had heard Allen's voice and decided to come into the room to tell her children to go to sleep. As soon as she stepped in, however, her eyes met with Denka's.

"NOOOOO!!!! A BUUUUGGGGG!!!! Why do bugs keep coming into the nursery?!"

Despite having been Strengthened, a single stomp was still all it took to reduce the grasshopper into ephemeral bubbles of light.

"Uh, good night..." Allen mumbled, promptly throwing his blanket over his head and doing his best to pretend like nothing had happened.

□ □ □

October rolled around and Allen turned six. Although he had taken to writing down his memories as Kenichi in his grimoire, he was starting to have difficulty differentiating between his two identities as of late.

His stats had gone up again, with his max MP increasing from ten to twelve. Since the rate at which he could train his skills depended on how much MP he had, this was a very significant step forward.

As he had only just started analyzing the Rank F Summons, there was still much that he had yet to confirm. He still had no idea what the "???" was this time. The reason was because he had quickly caught onto how

much potential Strengthening promised. He had originally intended on going straight to Creating and Synthesizing the Rank F Summons right after checking out Strengthening on the day of his level up. However he instead decided to first fully explore its capabilities.

Allen now looked back over the notes he had written down in his grimoire.

```
Strengthening costs 10 MP to use.
It adds +10 to two stats.
The stats that get bolstered are the same ones that Allen gains buffs from.
The effect of the skill is the same for Summons of all ranks.
The effect of the skill does not disappear no matter how many times the card is Summoned and Unsummoned.
The effect of the skill disappears when the card is used for Synthesizing.
Strengthening a card does not affect the buffs that Allen receives.
```

Looks like I can just let cards sit in their holders and go around Strengthening each one whenever I want or can get around to it. Obviously, if I use my Summons to fight some day, I'd want to use Strengthened ones.

It was currently morning, and Allen was washing his family's clothes by stepping on them inside a large barrel with his bare feet. This was surprisingly heavy manual labor. The mindless, repetitive nature of the task made it the perfect time to analyze his class.

The water used in the house came from a large jug that Rodin went to fill at a communal well early every morning. Used water would then be poured into a narrow ditch beside the house. Allen emptied the barrel into this ditch, then proceeded to hang up the newly washed clothes.

Oh, hey, the albaherons are flying. It's already fall, huh. Which means it's almost great boar hunting season again.

As Allen continued lining up the laundry on the clothesline that was slightly taller than himself, he looked up at the sky, spotting the winged silhouettes leisurely soaring high above. In addition to the albaheron, there was also another species, half as large and similar to what Allen remembered as a Japanese crane. The appearance of these migratory birds truly made him feel the change of the seasons.

Well then, my MP's back up to full, so let's resume checking out the Rank F Summons.

When Allen was finally done studying the Strengthening skill, he had promptly turned his attention toward Creation Lvl. 3 and Synthesis Lvl. 3, the two skills that opened the door to Rank F Summons. He had already gotten started making notes in his grimoire.

```
Creation Lvl. 3 costs 10 MP to use.
Synthesis Lvl. 3 costs 5 MP to use (unchanged since Lvl. 1).
Bird F is Synthesized using Insect F and Beast F.
```

“All that’s left is to figure out what this ‘???’ is.”

Despite having devoted the past few days to using Creation and Synthesis as often as he could, Allen had yet to discover the correct combination for the new type of Summon.

The only two kinds that I can Create outright are Insects and Beasts. By some strange rule, Birds can only be made through Synthesis. I’ve already tried Insect F x Beast F, as well as Beast F x Bird F. The only variation left is Insect F x Bird F. Please let this work. Because if it doesn’t, it means I’d have to start trying out Synthesizing cards of mixed ranks.

When Allen had attempted Synthesizing the two previous variations, only the cards placed on the right page in the grimoire remained, with the left ones disappearing completely. These results were clearly failures. Now, he opened up to the Synthesis page once more. His heart pounded with anticipation as he carefully placed an Insect F card and a Bird F card into the impressions.

Synthesize: Insect F with Bird F!

The front cover of the grimoire shone brightly, signifying that the process had been a success. However, Allen did not need to check the cover—the newly Synthesized card was right before his eyes.

He suddenly whooped, “Whoo! Success!” and picked up the card.

What’s this...? “Grass”?

The brand-new card had the words “Grass F” in the top left corner.

Grass as a Summon...? Well, I do also have insects. It’s a bit too late for that, I guess.

This new Summon looked like an apple, but it had a face and thin arms and legs that looked like twigs. A stalk protruded from the top of its head, connected to a single large leaf.

So, this is the plant-type line of Summons, right? Well, first things first, let’s name all the new Summons. All right, this is all four new variants of Insect F, Beast F, Bird F, and Grass F fully discovered.

Status of Insect F (Leech) Type: Insect
Rank: F
Name: Sucker
HP: 15
MP: 0
Attack: 13
Endurance: 20
Agility: 20
Intelligence: 13
Luck: 11
Buffs: Endurance 5, Agility 5
Ability: Suction

Status of Beast F (Dog) Type: Beast
Rank: F
Name: Pochi
HP: 20
MP: 0
Attack: 20
Endurance: 10
Agility: 15
Intelligence: 18
Luck: 11
Buffs: HP 5, Attack 5
Ability: Chomp

Status of Bird F (Pigeon) Type: Bird
Rank: F
Name: Poppo
HP: 11
MP: 0
Attack: 13
Endurance: 12
Agility: 20
Intelligence: 20
Luck: 14
Buffs: Agility 5, Intelligence 5
Ability: Transmission

Status of Grass F (Apple) Type: Grass
Rank: F
Name: Appo
HP: 14
MP: 20
Attack: 12
Endurance: 15
Agility: 10
Intelligence: 13
Luck: 20
Buffs: MP 5, Luck 5
Ability: Aroma

Beast F's Chomp is the first attack-based Ability I've seen. Now we're talking! This is much closer to what I'd originally imagined a Summon to be. But never mind that—there's another one that I'm even more excited about!

Now the roster of Summons available to Allen had expanded by four. They all looked interesting in their own way, and he would definitely be

taking his time analyzing each of them in turn. However, he was most excited by the one that provided the buff he had been most desperate for all this time.

The boy picked up the card of the Grass F Summon with quivering hands.

I finally get a Summon that buffs my MP!!!!!!!!!!

Appo had a pretty funny-looking appearance, being basically an apple with hands and legs. Allen imagined a bunch of deities up in the Divine Realm crowded around a conference table littered with design suggestions. He was not sure what to make of the God of Creation finally settling on *this* one, but Allen honestly couldn't care less what the Summon looked like—all that mattered to him was that it helped increase his MP. It was going to be absolutely indispensable going forward.

Allen had been nursing one very large concern. Namely, that he was going to need more than 300,000 Skill XP to reach the next level of Summoning. Raising Summoning to Lvl. 2 had required 1,000 Skill XP for first reaching Creation Lvl. 2. Raising Summoning to Lvl. 3 had required both 10,000 Skill XP to reach Creation Lvl. 3 *and* 11,000 Skill XP to bring Synthesis up to the same level.

In light of how Summoning had reached Lvl. 3 when Allen obtained Synthesis Lvl. 3, it seemed clear that the only way Summoning would level up would be when all the associated skills were raised first. According to this conclusion, the math was clear that obtaining Summoning Lvl. 4 was going to require more than 300,000 Skill XP. Allen listed everything down in his grimoire while doing the math in his head.

```
100,000 Skill XP for Creation Lvl. 3 → 4
100,000 Skill XP for Synthesis Lvl. 3 → 4
1,000 Skill XP for Strengthening Lvl. 1 → 2
10,000 Skill XP for Strengthening Lvl. 2 → 3
100,000 Skill XP for Strengthening Lvl. 3 → 4
```

At six years old, Allen's max MP was twelve, and he could regularly expend his MP three times each day. At this rate, it was going to take him more than twenty years to accumulate 300,000 Skill XP. Of course, the value of max MP would go up as he grew older, but even so, the math worked out to over a decade.

This Grass F card carried the potential to massively reduce those ten or twenty years.

Now I have to decide on how many Grass cards to keep.

Allen had a maximum of thirty holders in his grimoire. This had granted him more strength than any run-of-the-mill villager. He could at least do the laundry without having to stop and rest.

For now, let's keep ten Beast F. I'd need the power if anything happens. I still remember how it felt being pressed to the ground by that knight. Let's Create a few copies of the other cards, then dedicate all of the remaining slots to Grass F.

Leveling up was indeed important, but it should not be prioritized so highly that it affected quality of life.

I should probably also check out Grass F's Ability. Summon: Appo!

The card faded into bubbles of light as the Summon appeared. The apple with a face was skillfully standing up with its stick-like appendages.

Okay, it's an apple. It has arms and legs, but doesn't really move around much. I mean, makes sense, with it being an apple and all. Let's see its Ability in action. Appo, use Aroma.

Grass F immediately started burying itself into the ground. It vanished from sight in no time at all.

What the...? Why is it— WHOA! A tree suddenly sprouted out!

As soon as the Summon was fully underground, a sapling rapidly wriggled upward, eventually stopping at around a meter tall. A fragrance like essential oil tickled Allen's nose. It was a very calming aroma.

Uh, is this it? Sure, it smells great, but what am I supposed to do with ten of these cards?

The first impression Allen had of Grass F was that it was going to be a card good for nothing but the buffs it offered.

□ □ □

That same evening, after finishing the usual session of playing knight with Krena, Allen was helping out with dinner while mulling over what to do with the distribution of cards in storage.

"Rodin's late today," Theresia murmured worriedly.

Normally, Rodin would have been back from the fields quite a while ago. And yet, he was nowhere to be seen.

Another hour passed by. Because they could not make Mash wait any longer, the family decided to start eating first. However, even after they finished, Rodin was still out. The six o'clock bell rang. Allen played with Mash, then tucked him into bed.

Just before Allen himself drifted off, Rodin finally came home. He had a conflicted look on his face. "I'm back."

"Late day today, hm?" Theresia asked, setting out the belated dinner for her husband. Allen perked his ears to catch what he could from the nursery.

"Mm."

"Did something happen?"

"I was called to the village chief's house."

"Yeah?"

"And he said he wanted us to accept a few commoners into our great boar hunting party."

"Is...that a problem?"

Rodin paused, then said, almost as if to convince himself, "No, there's no problem. Our whole group will still be there. It's just that four or five new youngsters will be joining us, that's all."

That was the end of the topic, and the conversation returned to the usual exchange between the two. Allen burrowed under his blanket and allowed himself to fall asleep.

□□□

Splash!

Allen woke up to the sound of the water in the family's jug being poured out and refilled.

"Good morning, papa."

"Oh? You're up. Good morning to you too."

Ever since coming to the world, Allen had been having trouble waking up early. It was only recently that he had managed to consistently get up at six in the morning without an alarm clock. He watched as Rodin performed his usual morning routine.

"Here you go, honey."

"Thank you."

Theresia was also awake. She handed Rodin a jute bag filled with dried meat and potatoes and a leather waterskin. He draped it over one shoulder and secured it.

There was a two-meter-long pole with a large, broad blade secured to one end currently propped against the wall in the room with the sunken fireplace. This was a spear tailor-made for great boar hunting that Rodin had borrowed from the village's weapons shop the day before. He had spent all of last night carefully checking it and making sure there were no problems with it.

Rodin picked up the spear. "Well then, I'm off."

"Are you going to be back late?" Theresia asked.

"We have newcomers today, so the plan is to do the hunt close by. I shouldn't be out too late."

With that, the man walked off into the slightly biting cold.

I wanna join the great boar hunt someday too. I need to level up, after all.

Allen's level was currently still one, despite it having been six years since his reincarnation. The reason was simple: there had been no way for him to encounter any monsters. All serfs needed their village chief's permission to step foot outside their village, and village chiefs almost never gave it. Events such as the great boar hunts, which were crucial to the village's survival, were an exception. As a general rule, serfs had almost no freedom of movement.

After seeing Rodin off, Allen resumed his daily stone-throwing regimen.

It's pretty much confirmed by now that it'll take a million throws to reach the next level. I've already done more than 200,000 throws since the last level up and Throwing still hasn't gone up.

By now, the stones that Allen used had become entirely smooth from all the throwing, but he still continued throwing them. Come rain or wind, he still threw them. Even Rodin and Theresia had not expected him to keep it

up so religiously. When Rodin went to consult Gerda, he learned that Krena played knight every day as well and so was convinced that this was perhaps just how all children were.

With things being like this, normal skills are clearly not suitable for me. What I can gain from them is not worth the effort I have to put in.

By now, Allen's Sword Mastery and Throwing were both at Lvl. 3. Based on what he knew, it would take repeating something 10,000 times to gain a skill from scratch, another 10,000 times to raise it to Lvl. 2, 100,000 times for Lvl. 3, with the numbers going up tenfold for each successive level.

At this rate, it would be difficult to get any skill to Lvl. 5 even if Allen spent his entire life working at it. In all likelihood, Lvl. 4 would be the best he could achieve. If each level up doubled the effects of the previous level or some other equally tremendous boon, then it might indeed have been worth all the effort. However, this was clearly not the case.

It's true that the damage I'm dealing is greater than back when I didn't have the respective skills. I don't know for sure since there aren't any damage counters, but going by feel, I'd say it's only double what it was originally now that I'm at Lvl. 3. Given the case, it would be best for me to focus solely on Summoning. I can use a sword and throw stones when I need to in a pinch, but it's about time to dial down how much I'm focusing on them. Especially now that I know the effect of Grass F's Ability isn't to just make a nice smell.

Allen looked toward the one-meter-tall sapling giving off an essence-oil-like fragrance that he was standing next to. It emitted a pure and relaxing scent that he wanted to continue smelling forever.

He looked down at his grimoire.

Yep, the time it takes for my MP to recover has definitely gone down from six hours to five hours.

Ever since Allen first planted the Grass F tree in the garden, the number of times that he could gain Skill XP by using MP each day had gone up from three to four.

For the past five years, he had been earning Skill XP in cycles of once every six hours. If he really pushed himself to do four reps in a day, he had to do it once late at night, once early in the morning, once right after lunch, and once in the evening. However, he would have no choice but to revert to three reps or fewer the next day.

After planting Grass F, however, Allen had managed four repetitions every day for three days in a row. Upon careful observation, he determined that the time it took for his MP to recover to full had changed to five hours. This was huge for his leveling progress.

Well, I think I've learned everything I can about Appo's Ability.

Allen did a final once-over of his notes on Grass F inside his grimoire.

```
It releases a nice smell that induces restful sleep.
It shortens the recovery period of MP to 5 hours.
```

After its Ability is used once, both the card and the Summon disappear (turns into a tree).

One thing different about Grass F was that its Ability could only be used once. After being activated, it was no longer a Summon nor a card. It was quite literally just a tree. Of course, it was fully visible. It could be touched. It could be replanted.

□□□

"Allen! It's almost time for lunch!"

"Coming, mama!"

Although the Rank F Summons had been unlocked, there was still quite a lot about them that Allen could not explore in full. For example, Beast F had an Ability named Chomp, but he could not very well direct it to go bite a random person or even himself. As such, there was no way for him to confirm the effectiveness of the attack.

"A'en, no mo'!"

"Okay, Mash, I'm sorry."

Because Allen had been outside by himself for more than two hours, Mash glomped onto him as soon as he came back inside. There were still two more months until he turned three and could join Allen out in the garden. If he was left inside the house by himself for too long, he would get huffy.

It doesn't seem like I'm going to get much out of throwing stones for more than an hour each day. It would take more than five years to reach the next level, plus I have to look after Mash too, so I guess it's about time to move on.

Allen dug into a steamed potato while racking his brains for something that he could do together with Mash.

□□□

"Today was fun, Allen! Did you get stronger?"

"I guess."

Though I'm still no match for her. A Sword Lord is just way too strong. Kuhhhh!

The afternoon playing knight session had just ended. Just as she had been doing for the past three years, Krena dashed off back home. Only on the rare occasions when she got express permission to sleep at Allen's house did she stay overnight.

After the total number of cards that he could stock went up to thirty, Allen had promptly Created more cards to fill in those newly added slots. Now, although he was still carrying out various experiments and had reserved a significant portion of those slots toward increasing his MP, his fighting strength had also been bolstered quite a bit.

His current card distribution was as follows:

Beast F x 11
Insect F x 2
Bird F x 2

`Grass F x 15`

Consequently, the buff to his Attack had reached as high as +55. Krena, who had been playing knight with Allen for three whole years, had felt the slight change.

Now that Allen had finished studying the Rank F Summons to the extent of his abilities he had taken to focusing solely on leveling Strengthening.

Hmm, Strengthening is almost Lvl. 2. I should level up tomorrow at this rate.

Allen was absolutely over the moon at how much faster he was earning Skill XP thanks to Grass F.

□□□

"Papa's kind of late, isn't he?" Theresia murmured next to Allen as the two of them were making dinner together. It was indeed getting late. On days when Rodin went hunting, he would normally be back home around this time. He had even said that today's hunt would be at a nearby spot.

"Mm. Papa's late."

The two of them had thought to prepare a slightly more sumptuous meal than usual to celebrate Rodin coming home from the successful hunt. However, no matter how long they waited, he still did not come home. Because Mash could not wait too long, the family had to start eating without Rodin.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

Another hour passed, and the six o'clock bell rang.

"How much longer will he be?" Theresia was understandably starting to get worried. When Allen came back out into the main room after tucking Mash into bed, she turned to him and said, "Allen, hun, you don't have to wait up. Papa's been back late from hunting before, hasn't he?"

"But he said he would be early today."

"So he did. We're blessed to have a son who cares so deeply about us."

Theresia ruffled Allen's hair.

□□□

Another two hours had passed. It was now completely dark outside.

"Oh! He's finally back!"

They heard the voice of someone approaching the house, prompting Theresia and Allen to peek outside. They spotted a dot of light against the dark, inky night. The light, which was likely a torch, was very tiny, indicating that it was still rather far away.

This is quite late. But I'm glad papa made it home safe and sound.

Slowly but surely, the light drew closer. As it did, it became apparent that it was not just one light, but two.

Hm? He's not alone?

The lights then split into three. Then four. As they got closer and closer, their numbers grew and grew, until eventually they had become ten distinct lights.

Shouts came over the wind. Allen’s chest tightened with a sense of foreboding. When he looked to the side, he saw from her face that Theresia was feeling the same way.

When the procession was almost at the house, Gerda’s voice shouted, “Rodin! It’s your house! You’re home!”

Theresia was off before she knew it, rushing toward the approaching torches. Allen was right on her heels.

When she got close enough, however, Theresia froze in her tracks. She clapped her hands over her mouth in shock at the unbelievable sight before her eyes. Her body quivered violently.

“P-Papa…?”

Rodin had indeed come home, but on a stretcher being lifted by several men. The torches illuminated his figure with a harsh, flickering light. The hemp rags wrapped around his body were stained completely black and were hardened from an unbelievable amount of blood.

Chapter 7: Allen’s Resolve

“H-Honey? This isn’t happening, right? R-Rodin! N-NOOOOOOOO!!!”

Rodin had come home on a makeshift stretcher of mere sticks and cloth, completely covered with blood. Theresia rushed over to his side, but his eyes were closed and he was not moving. He remained unresponsive no matter how much she screamed and cried.

“Theres— *Theresia*! Calm down!” Gerda shouted before adopting a softer tone. “It’s all right. We used herbs on him.”

“What? How can yo— Are y—” Theresia struggled to understand how Gerda could spout such empty consolations.

“I mean it. We used a Flower of Muellerze. His life isn’t in danger anymore. But he does need to rest.”

“There’s no way th— How did you afford…?”

The price of the herb that Gerda had mentioned was far too high for serfs to afford. However, he repeatedly reassured Theresia that they had indeed bought and used one. The other men carefully carried Rodin into the house and lowered him into his bed. There were about twenty men here, which roughly matched the number of serfs that Allen knew was in the hunting party. This was probably everyone who had participated in today’s hunt.

“Bes, Bodro, can you go grab some water?”

“Sure thing.”

“’Kay.”

Gerda was giving out instructions in place of Theresia, who was beside herself. Understanding that Gerda meant to get some hot water going, Allen went to start a fire in the fireplace. Although he was also in a state of bewilderment, he tried to do what he could.

How did this happen?!

“Everyone else, you can go grab your meat and head on home. We’re good here.”

All the men exclaimed, “What?!” in unison, as if offended by the very idea. Mash, who had woken up due to the commotion, started crying from the shock of seeing so many strangers in the house. Theresia picked him up and stroked his head, trying to calm him back down.

Gerda gave the men a look. “Now you know what I mean, right? This many people being here is just a bother. I’ll take care of the rest, so you guys go home.”

The men all mumbled their understanding.

“And I don’t think I need to say this, but don’t do anything rash, all right?”

Bes, who had just come back in with the water, gasped with furious indignation. “Wha—?! Things ended up like this because of those damned commoners! You think so too, don’t you, Gerda?! We gotta make them pay!”

Everyone else raised their voices in agreement, causing the atmosphere to slowly take on a dangerous air. The light from the torches outside shone off of the spears currently propped against the wall, giving them an uncanny glint. Mash broke into a fresh bout of crying.

"Bes, I said I'll take care of this. Grab your meat and go home. You hear me? I want your word."

"F-Fine…"

Gerda's steely growl was filled with a different anger than Bes's. Just because he was holding the others back, it did not mean he was calm either. The silent pressure that he was emanating overwhelmed Bes and the other serfs, causing them to back down obediently. The men left final words of consolation before heading back out into the night. Soon, Gerda was the only person left.

Gerda helped as Theresia peeled away Rodin's bloodstained clothes. When she saw the scar on her husband's abdomen, however, she gasped in shock. It was as if his belly had been torn apart and then forcefully fused back together.

"I told you, didn't I? The Flower of Muellerze really did its job. We were lucky that the herbalist happened to have one in stock," Gerda said softly as he helped wipe Rodin down with a rag soaked in warm water.

"But how did you afford such a precious herb?" Theresia asked. She seemed to have calmed down slightly from seeing Rodin's chest slowly rising and falling with a steady rhythm.

"Well…when the knights came that time, I received a few gold coins. Turns out stashing them away'd been the right call after all."

Allen came out of the nursery after having tucked Mash—who had exhausted himself crying—back into bed. In a hard, clear voice, he asked, "What happened? Was it really a commoner who did this?"

Both Theresia and Gerda looked over in surprise. No child ever spoke the way Allen was now speaking. The boy stared straight at Gerda, his eyes filled with anger at the fate that had befallen his father.

Gerda held his gaze for a short while, then sighed. "The story's kinda long. Can you get me some water to drink?"

Allen grabbed a wooden cup and filled it from the family jug. Gerda gulped it all down in one go, clearly having been feeling parched.

"The village chief's been asking us for several years now to let commoners into our hunting team."

The group had always been the same twenty or so men, and they were all serfs. Some of them did not think very kindly of commoners. The reward for great boar hunting was meat—each participant would receive almost ten whole kilograms from each hunt. There were also roughly fifty people who helped with just the butchering, and they would receive a third of what the hunters got. All of these people were serfs too.

Serfs did the hunting, serfs did the butchering, and serfs ate the meat. The only way the commoners could get their hands on some of the meat was

when a serf came to exchange it for other necessities such as firewood and salt. Naturally, this was not much. Otherwise, commoners who wanted meat had to buy it from the village chief. However, this was meat from a Rank C monster, and the price was accordingly prohibitive. As such, the majority of what came to the village chief would simply be processed and sent straight to the feudal lord's city.

"There's demand for meat among the commoners, and the village chief himself also wanted to expand the hunts to include them. The problem, however, is that none of them volunteered themselves."

Going hunting, of course, meant fighting directly with monsters. It was not as if this was easy for the serfs either; there had been casualties over the past ten years of hunting. Even so, the serfs kept it up. The reason why they repeatedly exposed themselves to such danger was a no-brainer—it was all for the sake of their families.

"Then why were there volunteers all of a sudden?" Allen asked.

Gerda paused, then said, "Maybe because they're feeling overshadowed by us serfs."

A serf child had been proclaimed a Sword Lord. What's more, the person that the knight captain had praised in the presence of the most prominent members of the village—even going so far to use the feudal lord's name to do so—was not one of *them*, but Rodin. Apparently, word of this had spread like wildfire among the commoners after the feast.

"At the start of this month, I was called to Deboji's place together with Rodin. He told us that there were five youngsters who wanted to join the hunts and asked us to bring them along. Well, more like *commanded* than asked, really."

And so the hunting party trained the newcomers. Starting roughly ten days prior, the entire group gathered several times to show them the ropes. However, they apparently took offense to being under the instruction of serfs and did not take the training very seriously. Even so, Rodin remained patient with them, doing his best to help them learn what they needed to.

Then today came along. The hunt was going exactly according to plan and exactly according to training. Rodin had repeated the strategy to the new members time and time again. It was, put simply, a matter of luring the monster out, surrounding it, and having everyone stab it with spears until it died.

"Because both luring the beast and stabbing it while it flails around require experience, we gave the newcomers the role of surrounding the great boar."

This was supposedly the easiest job. And yet, they had messed it up. They were supposed to brace with shields in front of the charging boar, but they instead freaked out and froze. The shield wall collapsed, forcing the party to engage in pitched battle.

"The horn on the great boar's snout pierced Rodin's stomach, and here we are."

In the end, the situation devolved into one where all strategy was thrown out the window. Although the group did manage to kill the monster in the end, Rodin had ended up being severely wounded.

After sharing the full account, Gerda left as well. He had his own wife and children who were worriedly awaiting his return. With his exit, silence befell Allen's house. Theresia grasped her unconscious husband's hand tightly and told Allen to go to bed. Seeing how there was nothing else that he could help with, Allen obediently did as he was told.

□□□

The next morning, Gerda came by again, this time with a huge lump of meat in hand. When he placed it down, he said that this was Rodin's share. The size of the portion made it painfully clear just how much Rodin had been risking his life for his family's sake. Theresia crumpled to the ground in the earthen-floored room, weeping.

"Is Rodin still sleeping?" Gerda asked as he returned from helping to refill the family's jug. Instead of commenting on Theresia's tears, he simply said, "Don't worry. I'll definitely make sure your family can make it through the winter. All you have to focus on is safely giving birth."

"What? Oh, th-thank—"

That very moment, Rodin woke up, looking somewhat disoriented. "Ughhh…where's this?"

"R-RODINNNN!!!" Theresia rushed over and enveloped her husband in a hug. He let out a groan, indicating that his wound was not fully healed yet.

Mash also glomped onto him, crying, "Papa! Papa!"

A spike of pain shot through Allen's chest as he took in the sight of his three family members hugging each other.

Just what have I been doing?

If he was to be honest, he did not really have much of an opinion on having been born a serf. He was a serf because the character selection only allowed him to be a serf. Being a royal or a wanderer would have equally meant nothing to him. Anything would have been fine, really.

Back when he had been Kenichi, Allen had been playing games ever since he was seven or eight years old. Of the countless games that he had come across, not once had he chosen to pick it up or not based on who the protagonist's parents were. After all, it was just a piece of inconsequential lore that had no bearing on the enjoyment of the game itself.

But then he was born to Rodin and Theresia. Every day of his life in this world, he had watched the two of them living their lives to the fullest up close. Mash eventually came along. And now, there was a third baby in Theresia's belly.

The last traces of childishness seemed to seep out of Allen's face as a powerful sense of responsibility welled up from deep within him. He felt as though he had woken up in a way. Six years, and he was finally reincarnated in the fullest sense of the word. He was now standing here, in this world, on his own two feet.

“Hey there, tough guy,” Gerda chuckled as he looked at his grimacing friend.

“Gerda...? I’m...alive?”

“You got lucky. You doin’ all right?”

“Mm.” Rodin tried to sit up, but immediately sank back down as if an intense pain had just run through his abdomen. Clearly he was still far from being fully recovered.

“Looks like there’s no way around it. Don’t worry about the great boar hunts—I’ll handle them,” Gerda said to his friend of many years. Although his tone was brusque, his kindness came across loud and clear. “And I’ll also see your family through the winter. You just make sure you get all better by spring.”

“Thanks, man. I’m gonna owe you big-time.”

“That’s not right, father.”

“Hm? ‘Father’?” Rodin reacted to being called “father” for the first time ever. Something seemed different. He turned to look toward Allen, as did Theresia.

“I agree that you should rest up and get better, but *I* will be the one to take care of our family.”

“It makes me really happy to hear that, Allen, but Ge—” Rodin cut himself off. He could not continue the sentence, not after seeing the resolve in Allen’s eyes.

“I swear I *will* protect this family.”

In late autumn, at six years of age, Allen came into his own. An unfortunate incident had forced him to truly awaken.

□□□

The next morning, Allen arose and walked out into the main room.

“Good morning, mother.”

“Good morning, Allen.”

As of yesterday, Allen had stopped calling his parents by “papa” and “mama” and adopted the more mature “father” and “mother.” He grabbed the two wooden buckets from the earthen-floored area of the house by their handles and strode outside. The mornings were getting quite chilly now, with it nearing the end of October, but he did not complain.

With the empty buckets in hand, he headed toward the closest communal well. There were several that had been dug throughout the village for the villagers to use as water for drinking, cooking, washing, and other things. One of them was not all too far from Allen’s house.

“Good morning.”

“Ah, Rodin’s son. Good morning.”

There was already a line of four or five people present. Allen went to stand at the back. By watching the others in front of him, he figured out how to draw water using the rope. This was his first time seeing this task being performed up close.

Several of the villagers sent puzzled glances his way, wondering what a child was doing here. However, they quickly remembered what had happened to Rodin the day before and their looks turned into ones of sympathy.

Soon, it was Allen's turn. He dropped the well bucket down, then pulled it back up with the rope. Under the eyes of the surrounding adults, he filled both the buckets he had brought with him.

"Hey, kid, you might wanna go easy on the water there. You won't be able to carry your buckets if they're both too full."

"Huh? Oh, thank you for your consideration." Allen bobbed his head, then turned to head home, one bucket filled with thirty liters of water in each hand. The adults saw him off with their eyes wide open in surprise.

I knew it. Father could do this without breaking a sweat, which means he's stronger than the other villagers. These buckets are larger than what the other people were using too.

When Allen got home, he promptly emptied the remaining water in the family jug into the ditch beside their house. Then he returned it to its original position and refilled it with the freshly drawn water, bringing the buckets up higher than the height of his chest.

Theresia simply watched, not saying anything.

"Mother, Mr. Gerda'll be teaching me how to harvest potatoes this afternoon. Is there anything I should get ready beforehand?"

"I...guess so. Yes."

Because Theresia needed to look after Mash, tend to Rodin, and take care of herself for the baby in her belly, Allen had turned to Gerda for instruction instead.

Just yesterday, Allen had declared that he would do everything that needed to be done for the family. That included, on top of all the housework that he was already helping with, working in the fields as well. Refilling the water jug in the morning was also part of the new duties he had taken up.

The night before, Rodin, Theresia, and Gerda had all tried to talk Allen out of this, reminding him that he was but only six years old. However, it soon became clear that he was not going to be dissuaded. Therefore, the adults decided to let him have a go so he could understand firsthand what a monumental task it was that he had claimed for himself.

Because Rodin was still unable to walk out into the main room by himself —despite how small their house was—Theresia brought breakfast into the room they shared. She then fed him devotedly, one spoonful at a time.

At the same time, Allen ate his own breakfast. Once finished, he helped clean everything up, then proceeded to do the laundry. Lately, doing the laundry had become part of his daily routine. The stone-throwing that he had kept up for three whole years was now fully in the past.

It was only after lunch that Gerda came over, as he had to tend to his own fields in the morning. "Allen, if you really want to help harvest the

potatoes, bring this basket.” Gerda’s tone was slightly steely, as if he was trying to get Allen to give up soon.

The boy somehow picked up on his intention and obediently did as he was told with a simple “Yes, sir.”

As a general rule, the fields adjacent to Allen’s house all belonged to Rodin.

There are four or five fields separated by raised footpaths. If I remember correctly, we grow wheat, potatoes, legumes, and leafy vegetables. Looking at it up close really gives me a scale of how much land we have to tend to. As I’d thought, father must’ve leveled up quite a bit to be able to handle it all on his own. It’s gotta be all the great boars that he’s hunted.

Rodin had been killing great boars—Rank C monsters—before Allen was even conceived. Doing so had surely leveled him up quite a bit, making him significantly stronger than any normal villager.

Of course, the size of the fields under Rodin’s management were nothing compared to those in the modern world that were managed using machinery like tractors. However, they were still quite sizable for a single family to tend using only hoes and plows.

Allen followed Gerda into one of these fields, where the ground seemed to be largely covered with drooping leaves. As the boy took in the sights, feeling moved, Gerda proceeded to explain the task at hand.

“When you grab the stalk like this and *heave*—out come the potatoes,” Gerda said, using one of his muscular arms to uproot a plant. Potatoes of varying sizes appeared, attached to the stalk. Same as Rodin, he had also gained quite a few levels from all the great boar hunts.

The potatoes that had just come out both looked and tasted like what Allen recognized as satsuma potatoes, or Japanese sweet potatoes. Mash loved them because of how sweet they were.

“Like this, sir?”

“That’s right. The roots are pretty firmly dug into the ground. Use all your strength to pull the whole thing up.”

Just as Gerda did, Allen also reached out with one hand to grasp a stalk.

“Wait, you can’t use just one—” Before Gerda could finish his sentence, however, Allen already had the full plant in his hand.

“Do I put the whole thing in the basket?”

“Uh…y-yeah. You’ll have to sort through them when you get home. The smaller ones you’ll need to set aside to use as seeds for next year.”

Now that he knew how to do it, Allen proceeded to go through the rows quickly using both hands. Pluck, shake off the dirt, place into basket. Rinse and repeat. It did not take long for the basket to fill up.

Looks like I wouldn’t be able to finish digging them all up within a day. Not that I’m able to dedicate a whole day to this.

“Do I bring all these to the garden, Mr. Gerda?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, that’s right. I never knew you were so strong, Allen.”

“I am my father’s son, after all.”

There were still plenty of potatoes in the ground, as the total harvest was supposed to keep the entire family fed for the entire coming year. The earthen-floored room quickly ran out of space, so Allen stored the rest out in the garden. Although the fence surrounding the garden was worn-down and rickety, the garden itself was rather sizable. There was plenty of space for Allen and Krena to play knight and for storing crops.

Due to how big it was, when the basket was filled, it was heavier than the weight of a six-year-old child. Despite this, Allen still managed to pick it up handily, though he did have to use both hands. Gerda sharply sucked in his breath as his eyes nearly popped out of their sockets at the sight of this.

Rodin, Theresia, and Gerda all knew that Allen was not weak. In fact, they believed he was stronger than the average child. The playing-knight sessions he had with Krena involved speed and power far beyond what normal children could achieve, and the way he conducted his chores did hint at his strength.

However, as it turned out, that hint had been but the tip of the iceberg.

Allen walked while carrying the heavy basket, his small feet slightly sinking into the soft, tilled soil with each step. *Whoa, this isn't heavy at all. Looks like I was right to up Attack after all.*

The distribution of the cards in the holders of Allen's grimoire had been altered from skewing heavily toward Grass F for the MP buff to leaning toward Beast F for Attack. He secretly referred to this as "Farming Mode."

Allen had decided to put his full abilities on display, no longer holding back. He would be tackling both household chores and farm work with all the stats he had. His father was bedridden, his mother was heavy with child, and he had a younger brother. This was no time to pull his punches. There was a Sword Lord next door, after all, so he figured that even if he stood out a little, it would not be too much of a problem. He had been pronounced Talentless during his Appraisal Ceremony, so even if word got out about him, he expected most people to dismiss the stories as exaggeration.

When I have to work in the fields, I won't be able to keep too many Grass cards in stock. I'm going to have to be conscientious about my card distribution. What's more...

Allen shot a look toward a corner of the family's land where the grass had grown as tall as him. "Is that field over there also under father's care?"

"That's right. Next year, it has to be weeded and tilled."

So it is our land. It's currently sitting fallow, the grass is mostly dry and withered, and it's pretty spacious. It should be perfect for what I'm thinking of.

Just as Allen was off-loading another haul of potatoes in his garden, some people came by the house. "Excuse me. Is Rodin in?" the man asked.

"Look who it is. What're you here for, Chief?" Gerda asked, his voice tinged with a clear note of anger.

The visitor turned out to be the village chief, Deboji. Allen recognized him from having seen him up close during the Appraisal Ceremony and the feast afterward.

“Ah, Gerda. I heard Rodin’s regained consciousness,” Deboji replied before turning to his companion. “Come, boy.”

“Y-Yes, sir.” The other person turned out to be a teenager who looked around fifteen years old. Allen had never seen him before.

Deboji strode straight into the garden, indicating that he understood full well the sheer difference in social status between himself and a family of serfs. Allen and Gerda watched on as the two visitors approached the house’s door.

“What may we do for you today?” Theresia asked, emerging from the earthen-floored room. However, there was something different about her voice. There was a tone that Allen had never heard before.

She’s angry all right. Well, it’s not like I don’t get why. If the village chief hadn’t insisted on letting commoners into the hunting party, father wouldn’t have gotten hurt like this.

“I heard Rodin woke up. We’re here to pay him a visit.” Deboji gestured toward the small cask and foodstuffs in the teenager’s arms.

Theresia paused for a brief moment, then said, “He’s in the back.” She led the two inside the house.

Is it just me, or is this teenager kind of shaking?

The face of the young man who had come in together with the village chief was pale and his eyes were shifting about uneasily.

“Honey, the village chief is here to visit you.”

“Hm? Oh, I see.”

The teenager set down his get-well gifts in the main room, then headed toward the bedroom. The moment he laid eyes on Rodin, who was sitting up in bed, he fell to his knees and bowed deeply.

“I-I’m so sorry you were injured because of me!!!”

So, it’s this guy’s fault that father got hurt?

“Mm… Well, if you still want to keep at it, be careful next time. We’re all putting our lives on the line when we go out there.”

“Huh?” The teenager looked surprised at Rodin’s reaction. “Uh, y-yes, sir.”

Then, after a few more words, the village chief left. Apparently he was here only because the teenager could not come alone. Before long, the two of them were gone.

Allen and Gerda saw them off, then returned to harvesting the potato fields.

“Who was that, Mr. Gerda?”

“Well…” Gerda thought about it a bit, then decided to share the rest of what had happened the day of the hunt. He had said before that the whole operation had devolved into pitched battle because one of the newcomers

who was supposed to hold the line had freaked out. After that, however, the boar had continued charging straight toward him.

“Rodin threw himself in front of the attack to protect the kid from just now. Ah, I’m sure you already know, but you can’t tell anyone, all right? Your father doesn’t really like that kind of story about him spreading.”

As Allen and Gerda walked down a raised footpath, they passed by several people heading the opposite direction—in other words, toward Allen’s house. Apparently, they had heard somewhere that Rodin had woken up and were paying him a visit. Most likely, the various things in their hands were meant as get-well presents.

Allen found himself filled with pride at the sight.

□□□

“I’m going out for a bit in the afternoon today.”

“Really? Don’t stay out too late, okay?”

“Mm-hm. I’ll be back before it gets dark.”

All of the potatoes had been harvested and were now sitting in the garden. The next step was to pick out the small ones to set aside as seed potatoes for next year, then set aside the sixty percent that would be going to the village chief as tax. The garden always ended up being quite crowded during harvest season.

The tax collector came by several times each year on a pretty regular schedule. The next time he was expected was early December. Allen included “sorting through potatoes” in his list of tasks to do in the morning so that he could finish by the time the tax collector would arrive. He was starting to get more and more assimilated to the farming lifestyle.

Gerda had also taught Allen what he needed to accomplish once the potato sorting was over. First, he needed to clear the fields of any stems and roots that were still buried in the soil—if he did not, they would be in the way when it came time to plant new crops next spring. Second, he had to check all the irrigation channels, ensuring that they were cleared and a consistent depth their entire length. The channels surrounding Rodin’s fields were also the family’s responsibility.

That seems like a good spot to do it. I finally finished preparing the cards I need.

Currently, the distribution of cards in Allen’s storage was as follows:

```
Beast F x 16
Insect G x 3
Insect F x 2
Bird F x 2
Grass F x 7
```

I’m done readjusting my cards, and I’ve applied Strengthening Lvl. 2 to all of them. I’m as ready as I can be.

In order to make all the farmwork go by quicker, Allen had replaced many of the Grass cards he had been keeping with Beast cards instead. When he had gotten the ratios just the way he wanted, he had then started

dedicating all his MP toward raising Strengthening. By now, he had figured out pretty much everything there was to learn about Strengthening Lvl. 2.

```
Strengthening Lvl. 2
Costs 10 MP to use.
Grants the Summon +20 to the two stats corresponding with the buffs Allen receives.
```

This confirms that all the other skills aside from Creation have a fixed MP cost that doesn't change with level. Synthesis costs 5 MP, Strengthening costs 10 MP. It seems reasonable to expect these numbers will remain the same even when I continue leveling them.

Naturally, all the cards that Allen currently had in storage had Strengthening Lvl. 2 applied for the +20 buffs, rather than the +10 offered through Lvl. 1. Going forward, once he obtained Strengthening Lvl. 3, Allen intended on leveling up all three skills of Creation, Synthesis, and Strengthening at an equal rate.

Allen was still in the middle of sorting through the potatoes when lunchtime rolled around. Rodin was still too weak to come out into the main room, but he was noticeably improving. Allen had even planted a Grass F right outside his parents' bedroom window in the hopes that it might help the recovery go just a little bit faster.

After finishing lunch, Allen went outside again. Mash no longer got lonely nowadays, as Rodin and Theresia were home all day, so Allen was free to do everything he needed to do. He went to where the family's various baskets were stacked up and picked out the one most suitable for what he was planning. The softball-sized stones lying around the foot of the tree in the garden, completely smooth from years of being thrown, all went into the basket. Then Allen tied his wooden sword to his waist.

With the basket on his back, Allen walked out of the house. He traced the raised footpaths, making a beeline toward the area that Gerda had confirmed to be fallow ground. When he got there, he found himself facing weeds as tall as he was. They had been allowed to grow entirely as they pleased, and were now all dried out and withered.

Allen dove straight in. Somewhere along the way, he placed his basket down, then continued going even deeper, parting the grass as he went.

First, I've got to get a general feel for this field.

Due to how tall the weeds were, it was difficult to determine just how large this plot of land was. Allen went to and fro quite a few times, until he figured out roughly where the center was. He then promptly proceeded to stomp all the grass flat in the area. The dried blades of grass cracked under his feet as he continued wordlessly. Eventually, a circle roughly ten meters in diameter was completed, rather similar to the mysterious crop circles that had been popular back in the day.

Yep, this should do.

Allen returned the way he had come to fetch his basket. Then he took the stones out and randomly scattered them throughout the open area. He also drew his sword and held it up at the ready.

Summon: Hopper.

A frog roughly the size of an American bullfrog appeared in the middle of the mystery circle. This was Insect G.

Hopper, use Provoke.

“Ribbit, ribbit.”

Insect G started jumping as its normally green skin flashed red, green, and yellow. Allen hid among the grass, bracing himself with bated breath.

Ten uneventful minutes passed.

Hmm, this isn’t going how I’d hoped.

Allen looked up at the sky with his sword still in hand. He saw birds of various sizes soaring high above.

There are birds flying. Is it because there are too few of them? Or is it because the effect of Provoke doesn’t reach all the way up there?

Winter was coming. In order to get through it, firewood was an absolute necessity. Every year up until now, Rodin had procured this firewood to keep the family warm by bartering the great boar meat he had earned from the hunts. Mash was still very young, and Allen himself, being only six years old, was not all that resistant to the cold either.

For every great boar that got taken down, Rodin received ten kilograms of meat. And every year, he and his hunting group would kill around ten great boars. Half of all the meat from these hunts would go toward purchasing firewood.

This year, however, Rodin could no longer participate in the coming hunts. The family only had the single ten kilogram block of meat from the hunt that had nearly cost his life and the small amount of food that the village chief had left behind when he stopped by. The other members of the hunting party had also brought over what they could, but it was far from enough to procure the amount of firewood that could have been had for a hundred kilograms of meat.

In order to protect his family and provide for them, Allen had come up with the idea to catch birds instead.

Albaherons aside, the birds that look like Japanese cranes should have at least two kilograms of edible meat, right? I’d thought it wouldn’t be too hard to catch fifty of them, but turns out I was wrong.

There were other bird monsters also migrating north, but Allen had zero intention of getting involved with them. All he was aiming for were the large, crane-like birds flying overhead. The idea was to lure them down into a trap using Hopper’s Ability. However, a whole hour had passed with none of the flying creatures taking even the slightest interest.

Should I add another Insect G? I’m glad I made three of them just in case.

Out came the second Insect G. The two frogs jumped side by side, flashing provocatively.

Another hour passed.

Ughhh, looks like even two Hoppers isn't enough. Or maybe the effect just isn't reaching all the way up into the sky. I have no idea what the range is for this Ability.

Clang, clang, clang!

The village bell tolled, signaling that it was now three in the afternoon.

It's already three? I hope Krena's not taking the break from playing knight too hard.

In light of all the things that Allen now had to do for his family due to Rodin becoming bedridden, he had told Krena that he could no longer play knight with her anymore for the near future. She had looked sad for a brief moment, but then answered that she understood. She therefore had not come over these past two days.

All right. Gonna put the last one out too. This is all I've got.

"Ribbit, ribbit, ribbit," croaked all three frogs as they leaped all around inside the open area, their skin flashing intermittently between red, green, and yellow like broken traffic lights. Allen still had his sword held up in readiness, but there was still no change.

I shouldn't have put so much stock in this idea, looks like. No, no, it's still too early to give up. Maybe I should ready a few more Insect G cards and try again tomor—

That very moment, something huge crashed down in one fell swoop. Allen, who just happened to be on the verge of giving up and had thus let his guard down, watched in astonishment as the form waved a leg with glinting claws and tore through one Insect G. The Summon promptly disappeared into bubbles of light.

"SCREEEEEECHHHHH!"

The beast that had descended into this circular area screamed loudly and spread its wings wide in intimidation. It was an albaheron. This was the same bird that would fly northward every year in fall. The same bird that signaled the passing of the seasons for everyone in this world. The same bird that Rodin had named Allen after, hoping for his son to one day live just as freely.

"SCREEEEEECHHHHH!" That very bird shrieked once again. There was little doubt that it had descended in reaction to Insect G's Ability. It was in an extremely enraged state. In other words, a provoked state.

The length of the creature, from head to toe, was roughly double Allen's height at two meters, and it boasted a wingspan of four meters. Most of its body was covered in white plumage, but this gradually gave way to an increasingly darker shade of blue toward its wingtips.

Allen crouched low within the grass, carefully studying his shrieking opponent.

I was only trying to catch a random wild bird, but an albaheron came down instead!

Although the development had indeed caught Allen by surprise, he did not need to scramble to think of what to do next. Of course, he could just stay in hiding, hoping that the albaheron eventually calmed down and flew away. However, the faces of his family members sprang to mind. And at the same time, his blood as a gamer boiled in the face of what seemed like the promise of a challenge. As such, there was only one thing to be done.

Allen picked up one of the softball-sized rocks on the ground. While the albaheron snapped at the second Hopper and was occupied with the sight of it disappearing into light bubbles, the boy threw the stone with every ounce of strength he could muster. Thanks to the buffs from his cards and the support from his Throwing skill, the stone zeroed in on the monster's face with a speed several times faster than normal.

Squash!

"KIEEEEEEHHHHH!" The albaheron screamed, both from the pain of losing its right eye and in surprise at the unexpected attack.

Allen immediately picked up another stone and threw that too. This time, it hit the bird's long neck and caused it to bend at an extreme angle, giving the bird's neck a violent jerk. This second attack left the monster stumbling.

Looks like that was really effective! All right, you're mine! My first monster kill is in the bag!

Allen charged forward, wooden sword in hand, to deliver what he thought would be the final blow. He closed the distance in the blink of an eye, then leaped up to bring his weapon down on the creature's neck, throwing his full weight behind the strike. Once again, the neck bent greatly. Allen decided to press his advantage and finish this quickly.

However, although the albaheron had indeed taken damage, it was nowhere near the verge of death. It braced its neck, sending Allen flying from the rebound of his own attack. As it turned out, it still had plenty of fighting strength.

"What?!"

The unexpected development threw Allen into a small panic as he rolled through the dried weeds. *Shit, shit, shit, shit! Pochis, back me up!*

Fifteen Strengthened Beast F cards flew out of the grimoire all at once. The cards all shone brightly, then turned into dogs the size of Akitas with light brown fur. Their barks filled the air as they surrounded the albaheron.

Pochis, use Chomp!

Upon receiving the order to use their Ability, the dogs lunged forward and closed their jaws around the bird's feet, wings, and neck.

"KIEEEEEEEHHHHH!!!" The albaheron cried loudly in response. However, none of the attacks proved fatal. It unleashed kicks using its reptilian feet in retaliation. Although it did not have much agility here on the ground, it still had its full strength. A dog got kicked out of the open area and crashed into the weeds beyond.

Shit! The longer this goes on, the worse it becomes for me!

One after another, the Summons were crushed by the monster's beak, stomped by its feet, and sliced to ribbons by its razor-sharp claws. Every time a Pochi was reduced to bubbles of light, Allen felt his buffs decreasing. He hurriedly Created more cards, then Strengthened and Summoned them. The entire process cost 20 MP for each card, but he only had 47 MP at his disposal. His MP ran out after the second one.

Dammit, Rank D is just way too strong. Is it really too strong for me at Lvl. 1?

Just as Allen was about to give up, the albaheron thrust one of its large legs at him. He instinctively brought his wooden sword up. Although he managed to block the attack, the force still sent him flying backwards.

That was not the end of it. As Allen rolled about on the bed of crushed weeds, the monster once again brought its foot down, pressing the boy into the ground. When it pecked down, he hurriedly held his sword up horizontally, barely managing to save himself from being torn to pieces.

Oh, man, I'm so dead!

For the first time ever, Allen felt the presence of death. The albaheron was still being bitten by several Pochis, but it paid them no mind, seemingly caring only about digging its teeth into Allen. The monster was stronger than he was, and slowly but surely its beak drew closer and closer to his face. He stared directly into its mouth and at the rows of zigzagged teeth that lined its beak.

Eventually, a few of the front teeth made contact with Allen's cheek. They dug in, drawing blood. The wooden sword that he was using to hold the bird's head back was bending so much it would snap at any moment. Death had come to claim its prize.

What can I do?! Think, me! THINK!

Never before had Allen been more thankful for the thousands of hours that he had spent gaming in his past life. What he had gained from dedicating all that time to countless games was experience. Thanks to this massive amount of experience, he could largely figure out what a skill, technique, or spell did just by seeing its name.

Still pressed against the ground, out of time to even have a flashback, Allen shouted out in desperation, “Sucker! Come out!”

A Strengthened Insect F card flew out and materialized into a leech the size of a sea cucumber.

“SUCK ITTTTTT!”

With a cry of “Chuuu!!!” the Summon bunched up so much it looked like a volleyball, then launched itself straight at the albaheron’s neck.

“SCREEEEEEECCCHHH!!!”

The bird swung its head violently, trying to shake off the leech. However, the Summon clung on tightly, sucking nonstop. Allen somehow managed to escape from underneath the albaheron’s feet in the confusion. At the same time, Insect F’s body seemed to grow stronger and started blinking blue.

I knew it, the Ability is something similar to an Energy Drain spell!

Just like Pochi’s Chomp, Suction had been another Ability that Allen had not been able to examine beforehand. He still was not sure exactly what it was sucking up, be it HP or Attack, but clearly it was proving effective, and so he Summoned another one and directed it to attach itself to the albaheron’s thigh. It, too, started blinking blue as soon as it activated its Ability.

Before the leeches could be flung off, Allen dived back into the fray with his sword. The dogs also redoubled their efforts, their jaws snapping furiously. The fight was back on.

Another kick flew toward Allen, but it was neither as sharp nor as heavy as before. He managed to properly parry it with his sword this time, sending the bird’s foot shooting in another direction, before he landed another blow on the bird’s neck in a counterattack.

It’s definitely weakening. I’m gonna finish you off for good this time!

Allen clambered on top of the struggling beast and used the weight of his body to make it fall over backwards. Then he pressed his sword against its neck to choke it to death. Several minutes later, his grimoire appeared, glowing faintly.

Oh? There’s a new line in the log.

`<You have defeated 1 albaheron. You have earned 100 XP.>`

The silver letters on the front cover confirmed Allen’s victory and informed him that he had just earned his first experience points.

“HELL YEAH! I WON! I ACTUALLY BEAT IT!”

When Allen looked at the albaheron carcass—his first ever kill—lying on the ground, the memories of when he finished his first ever RPG as Kenichi rose unbidden to his mind.

This is an even bigger rush of achievement than I expected. Is this how all main characters feel when they kill their first monster after leaving their home village? Not that I've exactly left home.

Allen thought back to when he was slowly gathering chump change and wandering around a game's starter town with nothing more than a stick for a weapon, slowly leveling up by fighting weak monsters and returning to the inn whenever his HP got too low.

But one thing I learned is that even Rank D monsters are really strong. Well, it's true that I'm still Lvl. 1 and my Summons are only Rank F. Hmm, so I'm gonna need to beat ten of these to level up.

`XP: 100 / 1,000`

While confirming what he had gained and analyzing the fight just now, Allen returned all his Summons to card form and retrieved all of his stones. He then picked up his basket with one hand, returned his sword to his waist, and hoisted the albaheron onto his back. He wanted to keep its body as unharmed as possible, but there was nothing to be done about its legs and wings dragging on the ground. As a six-year-old, Allen's body was still tiny, after all.

Allen then headed home. When the front entrance of his house came into view, he spotted Krena standing in his garden.

Huh? What's she doing here? I told her that I can't play today, though.

"A-Allen, what happened?!" Krena jumped in surprise when she saw the various scratches all over Allen's body, including the obvious one on his face. She then rushed into the house in a fluster to inform Theresia and Rodin.

Theresia rushed outside. "Wait, what? A-Allen!!!" she cried, enveloping her son in a hug before patting him all over, checking for major injuries.

"I'm not hurt, mother. I caught an albaheron." The boy drew his mother's attention toward the catch on his back.

Thus the curtains fell on Allen's fight with the albaheron—his very first fight as a Summoner.

Chapter 8: Hunting Albaherons

After she confirmed that Allen was not hurt in any major way, Theresia heaved a sigh of relief. Allen gently set down the albaheron he had caught in the earthen-floored part of the house. As long as its wings were folded, the monster was only slightly larger than an average adult human. However, because of how small the house was, its feet still protruded out the front entrance.

"So, what happened, Allen?"

"It came down from the sky, so I caught it, mother." *Which technically isn't a lie.*

"Allen's so amazing!" Krena gushed with a bright smile, showing not a hint of fear at the sight of the monster's corpse.

In contrast, Mash burst into tears as soon as he saw the large body. "Mama, so scawieeee!" he cried as he ducked behind Theresia's back.

Come on, Mash, don't be such a crybaby, okay? You've gotta grow up into a strong man so you can help protect our family. But that aside, this bird... It's definitely heavier than twenty kilograms, isn't it? Which should mean it should have ten kilograms of edible meat. I'm sure the feathers can be used for something too. Plus, since it's a monster, it should have a magic stone. Heh heh heh, I wonder how much it'd be worth if I sell it?

Allen was already contemplating how much the albaheron was worth. While it may have been a monster taller than a human adult, all he could see were materials and meat.

Rodin, who was supposed to be sleeping in his room, asked loudly, "What's happened?!" When Theresia explained the situation to him, he exclaimed, "That can't be!" and stuck his head out the bedroom door. Because the ground of the earthen-floored area was lower than the rest of the house, the bird was out of his line of sight. Allen lifted its head up to show him.

"Th-That really is an albaheron. Did you really capture it, Allen? With your stones and wooden sword?"

"Huh? Uh, yes, father."

Unlike Theresia and Krena, what Rodin first noticed was the monster's squashed right eye and the neck that was bent in multiple locations from repeated blows. He had instantaneously analyzed the wounds and figured out how Allen had done it.

Because he wanted to take a closer look, he sat up and tried to drag himself forward. Seeing this, Allen rushed to his side in a fluster. "What are you doing, father?! You have to stay in bed!"

At this time, Gerda just happened to show up. "Whoa, what's with the commotion? What happened?"

Hold on, why is Mr. Gerda here at this time? We weren't expecting him—which reminds me, we weren't expecting Krena either. Wait, could it be that…

Well, I haven't been playing with Krena ever since the day father woke up. Krena agreed to take a break—albeit reluctantly—but could it be that she couldn't take it anymore after just these few days? Allen pondered to himself.

I can imagine how she might've been trying to burn off her energy by making Gerda play with her instead. But playing with Krena is even more tiring than farmwork—I know firsthand.

Allen kept staring at Gerda, but the large man seemed to be making an effort to avoid his gaze. Allen was convinced that he had guessed correctly. *Ah, so Gerda must've purposefully let her out of the house because he was reaching the end of his rope.* Gerda's body language was all the confirmation he needed.

"Papa, look what Allen caught! He's amazing!" Krena gushed as soon as she saw her father approach, completely oblivious to what Allen may or may not have deduced.

Gerda replied, "Seriously?" before proceeding to examine the albaheron. Then he turned toward Rodin, "Looks like this is for real. Don't be pushing yourself like this. Hm…you mind if I take care of this?"

"That…would be a big help. Please and thank you."

Hm? "Take care" of it? Is he going to teach me how to butcher it? I'd really appreciate it.

"All right. Let's go then, Allen."

"Uh…where to?"

"The village chief's house, of course. We have to hand over this albaheron, after all."

"Wait, hand over?" Seriously? Are all monsters considered his property?

Gerda grabbed the albaheron and the hatchet hanging on the wall. He beckoned Allen to follow him as he walked out. Making sure that the boy was watching properly, he explained, "You're gonna need to let the blood out first, or the meat's gonna spoil." Then he chopped the bird's head off and drained the blood into the ditch beside the house.

"Do all monsters belong to the village chief?"

"Technically, they belong to the feudal lord. All monsters that we serfs capture are subject to the sixty percent tax too. We only get to keep the remaining forty percent."

Seriously? And here I'd thought the tax was only for the crops. It also applies to monsters that we randomly catch?

Gerda went on to explain that no one would care if it was just horned rabbits—after all, they were only Rank E, the lowest rank—but those were the exception. Albaherons were Rank D, and therefore required proper taxation. All of this was a shock to Allen.

“However, Deboji *is* partly responsible for what happened to Rodin. There’s room for negotiation. And this is your first catch ever—I’ll make sure to haggle as much as I can.” If the village chief had not insisted on the hunting party letting commoners in, then Rodin would not have been injured. Gerda’s idea was to take advantage of the guilt that he must be feeling to secure better terms on Allen’s behalf.

“If that’s the case, I have an idea,” Allen said, proceeding to share how he wanted the negotiations to go.

Gerda listened thoughtfully, then nodded to show his acknowledgment. He adjusted the weight of the albaheron on his shoulder as he led Allen and Krena toward the direction of Deboji’s house. Because his house was on the way, he was planning on dropping Krena off while passing by.

“Allen, can I come play again?!”

Krena stared at Allen intensely, hanging on his next word. Gerda also stared at Allen intensely, hanging on his next word—albeit with a slightly different feeling behind it. Allen stopped to think about his schedule. Whereas his play knight sessions with Krena used to start after three o’clock and end at four, the starting time had been creeping forward to between one to two o’clock recently. Now that he and Krena had turned six years old, they did not need to nap as much after lunch, and the time freed up by sleeping less had been going toward playing instead.

Well, I’ve already finished harvesting all our potatoes. I think I can afford to give up my afternoons. “Yep, I’m free tomorrow. Come on over.”

“YAYYYY!” Krena jumped up and down with joy. Next to her, Gerda placed a hand on his chest and sighed in relief. Raising a Sword Lord was hard work.

After dropping Krena off at home, Gerda and Allen continued making their way toward the village chief’s house. The large albaheron gathered many curious glances when they entered the residential area, but the two proceeded without paying them any mind.

“Is Mr. Deboji home?” Gerda asked, knocking on the door of the village chief’s house. Soon someone came out. Gerda explained his business, then the person admitted him together with Allen.

“What a splendid-looking albaheron! What’s the occasion?”

The monster was laid out in the room where the feast with the knights had been hosted. The village chief and another person who was likely a relative had come out to speak with Gerda.

“Mm, this kid here’s Rodin’s son. This albaheron randomly flew down, and he killed it. So, now we’ve brought it,” Gerda explained, following the story that he and Allen had worked out on the road.

“I see, I see.”

“And as you know, Rodin is currently bedridden. Can the family keep the rest of the bird if they turn in all the feathers?”

“What?!”

Bird feathers could be used to make quills and accessories. As such, they were never merely discarded. Naturally the same was true for albaherons.

“Can’t you let them have that much, at least?”

“Ah, that’s not *quite* sufficient…for such a large bird…”

Silence filled the room. Gerda glared at Deboji as if trying to intimidate him, but apparently turning in only the feathers was truly not enough.

Gerda sighed. “All right, all right. Then you can have the magic stone too. How’s that, then? Rodin’s family has *four* people, remember. Honestly, even I don’t know how else they’re going to get their meat. Thanks to *someone* making an *unreasonable* demand, he can’t join any of the other great boar hunts this year either.”

“Wha—?! It was the feudal lord who ordered me to send more meat! I already explained it to you!”

Hmm? So it was because the feudal lord asked for more meat that the village chief wanted more people in the hunting party?

“So you did. Well? Feathers and magic stone. What do you say?”

“W-Well, uh, Rodin *has* done a lot for the village… All right, that will do.”

Gerda shot Allen a quick look. It was actually Allen’s idea to first offer only the feathers, then add the magic stone to the offer afterward. The idea was to start the negotiations with blatantly unreasonable terms so that the other party would become more amenable to the real terms.

“Thank you very much, Mr. Deboji!” Allen said loudly with a smile.

Deboji nodded graciously. “Mm! Make sure you grow up big and strong like Rodin, all right?”

“So, if I manage to capture more albaherons, I only have to give you all the feathers and magic stones?”

“Wait, what?”

This was Allen’s true aim, as he had every intention of killing more albaherons. However, the feathers and magic stone together were still shy of the sixty percent tax that was supposed to be imposed on everything. This was why Deboji hesitated.

“Come on, why not let the kid have it? That is, *if* he manages to catch another one, right?” Gerda asked somewhat conspiratorially.

“Ahhh…I suppose so. Kid, if you can get more albaherons, feathers and magic stones alone are fine.”

“Yay! Thank you very much! Um, it would be very tiring to bring the whole monster this far again. May I give everything to the tax collector all at once when he comes to our house?”

While he was at it, Allen tried to settle on the method of payment too. He was trying to make the case that it would be difficult to bring the entire albaheron to the village chief’s house every single time.

“Well…that does make sense. Do that, then.”

Although he had hesitated, Deboji fully believed that this business of hunting albaherons was merely a one-off matter. He therefore accepted Allen’s terms quite readily, giving him permission to pass the feathers and

magic stones from all future catches directly to the tax collector when he arrived in early December.

Afterward, Gerda and Allen hurried out, citing the need to return home before dark. Along the way, however, the large man praised the boy over and over again for his brilliance.

□□□

Allen was currently pinning down an albaheron all by himself in the fallow area of his family's fields.

"Damn, I didn't expect two of them to come down at the same time. I seriously thought I was done for just now. But I didn't lose a single Summon this time, so I guess I can claim this as a complete victory, right?" Allen muttered to himself.

After he visited the village chief's house with Gerda, Allen had started hunting albaherons once every three days. He had figured out that as long as there was one flying up in the sky, he could easily taunt it down using three Hoppers. They would not come down with only one or two Hoppers, and if there were no albaherons in the sky in the first place, nothing at all would descend. It had become apparent that only monsters were susceptible to Hopper's Ability. Allen had seen the birds that looked like Japanese cranes fly by multiple times, and not once did any of them show any sign of being Provoked.

Allen's grimoire now contained a clear how-to guide for hunting albaherons.

Wait until an albaheron is flying overhead.
Provoke it using three Insect Gs.
Once the albaheron has descended, retrieve the three Insect Gs before they're killed.
Have two Insect Fs use their Ability on the albaheron.
Further weaken the albaheron by throwing stones at it, then have sixteen Beast Fs surround and bring it down.
Use wooden sword to hold the albaheron's head down and finish it off through asphyxiation.

The first battle was a struggle, but thanks to it, Allen had figured out what his Summons could do. Since then, he had managed to win every battle entirely unscathed. In other words, he had discovered the sure-win formula. That is, until today, when two albaherons had come down at the same time.

Should I increase the number of Insect Fs just in case something similar happens again?

Allen's grimoire suddenly glowed faintly, interrupting his thoughts. Apparently the monster that he was holding down had just died. He cast his eyes over at the tome, then blurted out, "HELL YEAH!!! I LEVELED UP!!!"

<You have defeated 1 albaheron. You have earned 100 XP.>

The silver letters in the log informing him that he had just killed the albaheron were followed by gold letters.

<Your XP has reached 1,000/1,000. You have reached Lvl. 2. Your HP has increased by 25. Your MP has increased by 40. Your Attack has increased by 14. Your Endurance has increased by 14. Your Agility has increased by 26. Your Intelligence has increased by 40. Your Luck has increased by 26.>

H-Holy crap, everything's gone up by so much! That's having stat rankings on par with a Sword Lord for you. Hmm, the difference between the increase for S- and C-ranked skills is pretty stark. So this is what the results of the Appraisal Ceremony were referring to.

Allen took a good, long look at what his Status had now become.

Name: Allen
Age: 6
Class: Summoner
Level: 2
HP: 39 (65) + 80
MP: 36 (60) + 35
Attack: 14 (24) + 80
Endurance: 14 (24) + 16
Agility: 30 (51) + 26
Intelligence: 42 (70) + 10
Luck: 30 (51) + 35
Skills: Summoning {3}, Creation {3}, Synthesis {3}, Strengthening {2}, Expansion {2}, Deletion, Sword Mastery {3}, Throwing {3}
XP: 0/2,000
Skill LevelsSummoning: 3
Creation: 3
Synthesis: 3
Strengthening: 2
Skill ExperienceCreation: 11,933/100,000
Synthesis: 2,610/100,000
Strengthening: 1,480/10,000
Creatable SummonsInsect: F, G, H
Beast: F, G, H
Bird: F, G
Grass: F
HolderInsect: F x 2, G x 3
Beast: F x 16
Bird: F x 2
Grass: F x 7

I see, so HP and MP get topped back up when leveling up.

Allen found it a pretty refreshing sight to still have MP, as it would always be at zero whenever he leveled up a skill related to Summoning.

The numerical increases listed in the message on my grimoire were added to the figure inside the brackets, with the sum then being lowered to sixty percent, it looks like. In other words, the ratio isn't affected by leveling up. Ugh, this stat suppression seriously hurts.

So, six years in, and I finally get my first level up! Or, as people in this world call it, I finally surpassed a Trial of the Gods. Wait, was it "surpass" or "achieve"?

Previously, Allen had asked Rodin, "How can I be as strong as you, father?" After all, it was obvious that Rodin was significantly stronger than the average villager. One clear indication was the fact that the bucket he used to bring water back from the well and refill the family jar every day was larger than what others used. Allen suspected this was because he had earned quite a few levels from defeating dozens of great boars over the past ten years. In response to his question, Rodin had answered, "The gods give people trials, and when they overcome those trials, the gods give them power." This was how the residents of this world perceived the concept of leveling up through the perspective of their faith.

Whoops, she's about to come over soon. I gotta hurry back.

Allen hurriedly stacked both his kills together and lugged them home. Time was running out.

"I'm back!"

Theresia started from surprise at seeing her son return with not one, but *two* albaherons. However, she did her best to sound calm while replying, "Welcome home."

"You caught more?" Rodin asked from inside the house.

"Yes, father. Wait, are you all right?!"

During the past month, Rodin's condition had greatly improved. He could now both sit and stand, though his wound would still hurt if he stood or moved around for too long. Right now, he was sitting and beating the straw from their harvested wheat with a small club. After softening them up this way, they would then be woven into straw sandals and winter shoes. Because the club was quite large, Allen was worried the exertion might cause his father's wound to open up again.

"I'll be fine. I can't let you shoulder every—!" The moment Rodin saw Allen's face, he froze as if he had noticed something.

"Is something on my face, father?"

"No, it's nothing. I must have imagined it."

Now that's a line that piques my intere—

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

"AH! Oh no, I've got to hang these up before Krena comes!"

Allen rushed out to the narrow ditch next to the house, bringing the albaherons with him. There was now a frame here where Allen could hang his game up to let their blood out. It was a simple construct that he had

made out of sticks and boards that he had found inside the house. It was positioned right above the ditch so that he could bloodlet his catches directly into it.

“Alleeeen!” Krena cried cheerfully as she ran up, her wooden sword in hand.

“Hey there, Krena. Sorry, can you give me a few more minutes? I’m almost done.”

Nowadays, Allen was back to playing with Krena on a daily basis. Normally, this happened between 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. However, he had told Krena to come at the 3 p.m. bell every third day, freeing that time for himself to hunt more albaherons and hang them up for bloodletting. Today, however, he was still in the middle of the latter task when Krena arrived.

“You caught two of them today?! You’re amazing, Allen!”

Krena watched Allen at work with dazzling eyes, showing her characteristic fearlessness toward monsters. Allen prayed that some of this bravery would rub off on his scaredy-cat little brother Mash as he quickly finished securing the birds.

The two children then began their session of playing knight in the open area of the garden not occupied by crops. Mash watched them from the window. He still was not allowed out of the house yet, not until he turned three. His birthday was in spring, however, so it was not too far off.

Today, I’ve fulfilled my quota of ten albaherons.

Each bird Allen brought down yielded ten kilograms of meat, the same amount as one round of great boar hunting. Now that he had killed ten albaherons, the family should have enough with which to barter for firewood to last them through the winter. All that was left was to preserve the meat and do the actual trading.

The albaherons are gonna stop flying next month, so I’ve gotta catch as many as I can until then. For my next level up, I’ll need…twenty of them. Ugh, I don’t think I’ll be able to reach it within the year.

“You’re wide open!”

“Ow!” Allen suffered a whack to his head for being occupied with his own thoughts during the fight.

“Gosh! That’s what you get for zoning out!”

Krena pouted at Allen’s inattention, prompting him to apologize while rubbing his fresh bruise.

□ □ □

At 4 p.m., the play knight session came to an end. Because the sun would be setting soon, Krena quickly took off back home. Allen helped his mother—whose belly had grown quite large now—make dinner. Once he was done with the preparations, he went outside to confirm that all the blood had drained out of the albaherons, then brought them inside the house. He could not very well leave them sitting outside for the entire night, after all.

Naturally, all the neighbors already knew that Allen was catching albaherons. He had killed a total of ten of them now and had hung them up outside his house every time, so it was only a matter of time until word got around. When Allen went to draw water at the well in the morning, they would pester him about how he managed it, but he never said anything beyond, “They came down and I killed them.”

Allen hunted exclusively under the cover of the tall grass in his family’s fallow field in order to hide how his hunting actually worked. Because the grass was dry, it would rustle loudly whenever anyone tried to pass through. Allen was prepared to call off his hunt if he ever heard rustling, but to this day, no one had ever come by to peek.

“That’s the tenth albaheron you’ve caught, isn’t it?” Rodin asked as the family ate dinner around the sunken fireplace in their house.

“Yes it is, father.”

“Incredible.”

Apparently it was really bothering him. In the past month, Allen had tackled all his duties with power far greater than that of any normal person. Despite how large the potato field was, he had finished harvesting it in merely two days. He brought the water every day using the same buckets Rodin had used, and caught albaherons regularly like it was nothing. Although his parents had known he was a smart child before, all of his recent feats had blown their expectations out of the water, proving just how capable he was.

Allen looked at Theresia and noticed the concern in her face. Unlike Rodin, she was not so much bothered by *how* Allen did what he did as she was about the fact that he had yet to share anything about *himself.* Truth was, he had also been thinking that it was about time he gave his parents an explanation for why he was this much stronger than other people.

So Allen shot his little brother—who seemed to be in the middle of battling his food—a glance and asked his parents, “Once Mash is asleep, can I talk with both of you?”

“Mm,” Rodin replied with an understanding nod.

Because both Rodin and Theresia stayed home all day nowadays, Mash rarely made a fuss about how long Allen was staying outside. That night, after Allen played with him a little bit, he grew tired and fell asleep.

When Allen came back out into the main room after tucking Mash into bed, he found both his parents sitting and waiting for him. He settled into his own seat.

Before he could say anything, however, Theresia stated emphatically, “Allen, you will always be my son, and I will always love you.”

“Thank you,” Allen replied. “This might get a bit long. Is that okay?”

Rodin nodded with a brief grunt.

“The truth is, I received a message from the gods when I was one year old.”

“A message?”

“From the gods?”

“Yes. It said, ‘Allen, I will grant you wisdom and strength.’”

“Wisdom?”

“Strength?”

“Mm-hm. Basically, making me smarter and stronger than normal people. But there was a second part to the message: ‘I am also giving you Trials that even a hundred men together might not achieve. Overcome them using the wisdom and strength I grant you.’”

“A hundred?!”

“Trials of the Gods!”

Allen had purposefully used the term “Trial” in place of “level.”

“But if even a hundred men cannot achieve it…” Anguish filled Theresia’s face. “Oh, heavens, why are you gods doing this to Allen?”

In contrast, Rodin’s reaction was a lot calmer. “I see. And you overcame the first of those Trials today?”

“What?” Allen asked, caught by surprise.

Rodin touched his son’s cheek with a knowing look. “You might not have noticed it about yourself, but you used to have a scar right here. But it was gone when you came home this afternoon.”

During his first ever fight with an albaheron, the monster’s razor-sharp teeth had dug into Allen’s cheek and left him with a scar. However, just as Rodin pointed out, that scar had disappeared completely. Allen had no idea.

Wait, leveling up doesn’t just restore HP to full, but also heals old wounds? Allen thought. Now he finally understood why the rest of the hunting party had continued trying to kill the great boar on the day that Rodin had been injured. They were hoping that his wound might be healed if he managed to overcome a Trial of the Gods through the death of the boar.

“I…think I really might’ve overcome my very first Trial of the Gods,” Allen agreed. “I felt much stronger all of a sudden.”

“I see. So, did this god who gave you a message tell you their name?” Rodin asked, as this world had numerous gods and goddesses.

“Um, it was Elmea. Do you know who that is?”

“Th-That’s the God of Creation. You shouldn’t really call him by name so casually, son. Most people call him Lord Elmea.”

“Okay. I’ll add the ‘Lord’ when I’m in public, then.” Apparently Allen had not even the slightest shred of religious piety.

“Ummm…I suppose that will do. Do you know what happened with your Appraisal Ceremony, then?”

During his Appraisal Ceremony, all of Allen’s stats had shown up as “E,” and he had been declared Talentless. Rodin had always believed this reading to be strange. In light of everything he had seen his son do, he could not imagine him being Talentless, and neither did he think his son’s stats were so low.

“Oh, Elmea gave me another message two months ago explaining what happened.”

“Th-That recently?!”

“He said the stat readings were based on how fast I can overcome my Trials and grow stronger, so the readings were correct. But about my Talent, he said that it couldn’t be Appraised because it was so new. He didn’t tell me what my Talent actually is, though.”

“S-So that’s what happened…”

Allen did not intend on telling his parents that he was a Summoner. This was a Talent that involved calling forth monsters from thin air and having them do his bidding. There was plenty of room to cause misunderstandings, especially because it would be Rodin and Theresia’s first time hearing of such a class. As such, Allen planned to maintain a wait-and-see attitude for now, keeping an eye out for another opportunity to sit his parents down once again to reveal everything.

For now, the goal was to only convey the fact that the gods had assigned him Trials that could not be achieved even by a hundred people, and that they had also given him the wisdom and strength to overcome those Trials. This was enough to explain why he seemed smarter than his peers and why he could do things which many people could not.

Of course, he had also not told his parents that he had been reincarnated and maintained memories of his previous life. The moment he was born, he had made a decision to keep this to himself. If having black hair and eyes was a sign of having been reincarnated from another world, then the surprised reactions of the villagers proved that other people like him were either extremely rare or just outright did not exist. There was the possibility that the villagers were just ignorant about the world at large, as this village was quite closed off. However, the knight captain had also shot Allen very curious looks during his visit, which seemed to imply that his rarity was not limited to this frontier village alone.

Theresia gave her son a big hug as the image of him throwing stones at the tree in their garden until its bark peeled off came to mind. Now, he was regularly fighting albaherons for their family’s sake. When she thought of how he had been struggling to overcome these cruel Trials all by himself this whole time, a twinge of pain shot through her chest.

“Why didn’t you tell us earlier?” she asked.

“That’s right,” Rodin agreed. “I also wish you’d told us earlier. We’re your parents. But at least now I understand why you’re so smart.”

“Sorry, father, mother. I’m sorry it took me so long to tell you. But I am serious about overcoming these Trials.”

Unease filled Theresia’s eyes. Her beloved son was apparently resolved to walk a path that was sure to be filled with thorns, a path that not even a hundred people working together could pass.

Rodin, however, was supportive of this decision. His years of hunting great boars had left him with a greater sense of familiarity with the Trials of

the Gods. “If that’s what you choose, then so be it. The gods do not give us beyond what we can handle, but if you ever want a helping hand, your mother and I will always be there for you.”

“Thank you, father.”

“Have you told anyone else about this?”

“No, sir. I haven’t even told Krena.”

“Mm, you should probably keep it that way. The God of Creation is an absolute existence. There might be people who wouldn’t believe you and accuse you of taking Lord Elmea’s name in vain.”

Makes sense. I only told them because they’re my parents. Anyone else would ask me for solid proof, and I don’t have it. Both letters disappeared right after I read them—not that anyone can see my grimoire in the first place.

“Yes, father.”

“However…”

“Hm?”

“Can I brag about this to Gerda?”

“…”

“Is that a no?”

“I mean…I don’t mind.”

“Ha ha ha! That damn Gerda, always going on and on about Krena being a Sword Lord. I’ve gotta make him understand how incredible Allen is too!”

Apparently Rodin had been at least slightly jealous of what a high achiever his best friend’s daughter was. Allen could not help but chuckle a little at this human side of his own father.

Chapter 9: Dogora, Son of the Weapons Merchant

Snow fell gently from the sky. It was now December. There were no more albaherons flying in the sky, as they had all finished migrating. Before then, however, Allen had managed to hunt six more of them for a total of sixteen. He had then finished butchering them all, and the tax collector had come the other day to collect their feathers and magic stones together with sixty percent of the family's potato harvest.

The village chief did not have to collect taxes in person, so it was another villager who had showed up with the cart. Although he had heard the rumors of Allen capturing albaherons, he was surprised to find out just how many there actually were.

There were now 150 kilograms of meat hanging out in the garden to dry. The first ten kilograms were already fully preserved.

"You ready, Allen?"

"Yes, Mr. Gerda."

Today, the two of them were going to the residential area to buy firewood and salt.

Firewood was an absolute necessity for getting through the cold winter. Normally, Rodin would, after every hunt, immediately trade in a portion of great boar meat he received for some firewood. That way, there would always be a certain amount within the house. This year, however, because Rodin got hurt, the family had not purchased any new firewood within the past two months.

Similarly, their salt reserves were also scraping bottom. Firewood was quite readily available, as it was sourced from the surrounding forest by the village's woodcutters who chopped down trees in the surrounding forest. Salt, however, had to be brought to the village from faraway sources by traveling merchants. During years when few traveling merchants came and supplies dwindled, the price of salt would rise. As such, it was common sense for families to stock up whenever possible.

Today was the day when Gerda would teach Allen how to purchase goods. Because they did not have carts, the two had to attach everything onto racks that they would then shoulder. The one currently on Allen's back was loaded with ten blocks of albaheron—one kilogram each—all of which he planned on bartering for firewood and salt.

Theresia waved her hand as she saw her son off, Rodin standing next to her. He had gotten much better in the month and a half since the incident. Although he could stand and walk without much issue now, going to the village center required two whole hours of walking, plus the return journey would require lugging home a heavy load. He was not quite well enough to

do this just yet, so Allen offered to go instead. By now Rodin knew better than to say no and simply asked Gerda to accompany him.

Gerda had likely heard about what Allen had revealed to his parents, but the way he treated the boy remained largely the same. He already had an inkling that the boy was someone special, so he took the revelation in stride.

“Are the commoners still in the hunting party, Mr. Gerda?”

Allen had started speaking to Gerda more respectfully because of how much the man had taught him about farming and how much he had taken care of Allen’s family in general. In fact, he spoke to Gerda even more courteously than he did his own parents.

“Mm? Why the question all of a sudden?”

“Nothing much. I was just curious.”

Because it would take a whole hour to reach the village center, Allen tried striking up a conversation. Gerda had an easygoing and straightforward personality and would generally answer whatever Allen asked.

“Nah, they never came again after that one time, and Deboji hasn’t said anything either. Which means it’s probably only us serfs for the rest of the year.”

“I see.”

“Mm.”

A part of Allen wondered if this was because the commoners had been scared away by the experience. However, he put the thought out of mind, as this question was only the conversational starter. He promptly moved on to the real topic.

“By the way, what’s the difference between being a commoner and a serf?”

“What’s this out of the blue? Go ask Rodin.”

“Can you imagine how awkward that would be?”

It would be akin to Allen telling his parents that he did not want to be a serf anymore, although that was the truth. Even though the reason for the question was his desire to help raise his whole family out of serfdom, his parents would still be shocked, to put it mildly. He had no one else to ask aside from Gerda.

Gerda vigorously scratched his head and sighed heavily, but still proceeded to answer Allen’s question. To sum up his explanation, the biggest difference between serfs and commoners was how they were taxed. Serfs were taxed sixty percent of everything they produced, be it through hunting, farming, or any other means. Commoners, on the other hand, were taxed per head. Each adult was taxed three gold coins, and each child was taxed one gold coin. This tax was collected on an annual basis.

I see, so our family would be taxed based on the four of us, which comes to a total of eight gold coins each year. After mother gives birth again next year, that number is going to go up even higher.

“Hmm… Since we’re on the topic, how can a serf become a commoner?”

“If I remember correctly, you can pay ten gold coins. Ah, I’ve also heard of cases where the feudal lord granted someone commoner status as reward for some achievement. I don’t know how true those stories are, though.”

So the buyout price is the same for both adults and children. My family would need a total of 50 gold coins, then.

“Thank you, Mr. Gerda. Uh, please don’t tell anyone I asked you about this.”

“You know I won’t,” Gerda scoffed while tousling Allen’s hair.

Eventually, the pair reached the commercial district of the village, where the road was lined by stores on both sides.

“First is the salt. The firewood’s heavy, so it comes after,” Gerda explained as he pushed through the Western-style swing doors.

Allen replied, “Yes, sir,” and followed along behind.

The inside of the store was basically just a counter in front of shelves lined with bottles presumably filled with salt and other spices along the back wall. There were no items on display in the storefront, likely due to the costly nature of the goods handled here.

Gerda, who was here today to do his own trading on top of showing Allen the ropes, walked straight up to the counter and simply said, “Exchanging meat for salt.”

There was no haggling. The sour-faced storekeeper asked what kind, and Gerda told him it was great boar. The former asked to see the meat, so the latter placed the goods on the counter. The storekeeper used what looked like a scale to measure the weight of the large block of meat, then said simply, “Twelve scoops.”

“That’ll do,” Gerda replied, handing over a small wooden box.

The shopkeeper accepted it and used what looked like a wooden tablespoon to scoop salt from a large urn he had into Gerda’s box.

“Go on, confirm it.”

Gerda accepted his box back and shook it lightly. Then he opened the lid back up, dipped the fingertip of his pinky inside, and licked the granules stuck to his finger.

“Mm, confirmed,” he said gruffly before tying the box up with rope and returning it to his chest pocket.

Seeing that Gerda was done, Allen stepped up to copy what he just saw. He said, “Albaheron meat,” then placed five blocks onto the counter. The shopkeeper roused a little upon hearing the unfamiliar name, but then returned to wordlessly weighing the meat. Allen waited for him to finish, somewhat worried about being turned away.

Eventually, the shopkeeper said, “Ten scoops.”

“Albaheron is worth less than great boar?”

“Huh? It’s the same.”

In other words, Allen had simply brought less than Gerda did. He obediently handed his wooden box over, and the shopkeeper filled it. After confirming the salt the same way Gerda did, Allen tied his box up and,

because it would not fit in the front of his clothes, cinched it around his waist with a rope.

Next, the pair headed for the general store, which sold fruit, wheat, beans, potatoes, and other similar things that farmers would want to barter with each other for. The fruit, however, was special in that it had been brought to this village by a traveling merchant, as there was no orchard in this village.

The old lady who minded the counter in this store turned out to be very friendly. Here Gerda exchanged one block of meat for four molmos, then Allen did the same using a block of albaheron meat.

The salt merchant was just...salty. Ha ha...never mind. Ahem. Everything so far implies that meat from the Rank C great boar and meat from the Rank D albaheron are assigned the same value. Is this how it's supposed to be?

Allen had assumed that the higher ranked the meat, the more it would be worth. He had therefore brought more than he thought would be necessary, just in case. As it turned out, however, his fears had been unfounded.

There were no pigs or chickens in the village, as far as Allen knew. In other words, no one was raising or breeding livestock—the only animals inside the walls were the horses that pulled carts. *Is meat valuable just on the basis of being meat, regardless of what creature it comes from?*

Naturally, Allen had been writing down his observations so far, such as the various merchants' attitudes, the location of each store, and the value of products. Next time, he would be coming by himself. It was going to remain cold until March, which meant he would need to make multiple trips until he eventually gathered a total of three months' worth of firewood. How much he could carry each trip was limited.

The firewood merchant had stationed himself in front of a large warehouse. The crack through the door revealed piles and piles of firewood stacked within.

After Gerda showed him how it was done, Allen handed over one block of meat and received four bundles of firewood in return. The wood in each bundle was around a meter long, and one entire bundle weighed around fifteen kilograms. This was enough to last a household one day if the fireplace was not kept lit all day long. Economizing while the sun was up was crucial to cutting costs.

Allen began tying the firewood to his shoulder rack. The firewood merchant was a taciturn and gruff man, but even he could not help but be concerned. After all, four bundles together added up to a total of sixty kilograms. He approached Allen to tell him not to overdo it, but then stopped dead in astonishment as the boy shouldered the rack and stood up as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

With that, Allen and Gerda turned to make their way home, paying the firewood merchant no mind. Now Allen knew how to barter for what his family would need in the coming winter.

□□□

Two days after Allen had secured the first four days' worth of firewood, he was back at the village center for another round of bartering. Because Krena came in the afternoons, his plan was to do these shopping trips in the morning every second or third day.

Rodin and Theresia had given him complete discretion on how to spend the meat from all sixteen albaherons. Last time, he had used some to bring home molmo fruits and they had not said anything. While watching Mash happily eat his portion, Allen thought about how he could provide a more nutritious diet for his pregnant mother.

Allen packed ten blocks of meat—totaling ten kilograms—onto his rack and put on a thick pair of shoes woven from wheat straw. These shoes were supposed to keep his feet warmer, but melted snow would still soak through. The hemp outfit he was wearing had been worn quite thin as well, so honestly, it was still really cold out.

An hour later, he arrived at the commercial district. The villagers referred to it as a district, but it was really only a few merchants' stores huddled together.

Since I'm alone today, I can take my time exploring.

First, Allen walked into the salt merchant's store. The amount that he had purchased last time was far from enough, as he needed to build up a stock. Same as before, the merchant accepted his five blocks of meat and weighed them wordlessly.

Soon, he gave the same assessment. "Ten scoops."

"Yes, please," Allen replied, passing over his box.

The man accepted it and transferred salt over using his large spoon.

"Thank you," Allen said, checking and then putting the box away. "By the way, how much would this be in money?"

"Hm? Five silvers."

All right, noting that down.

The next place Allen went to was the general store. He was leaving the firewood merchant for last, just as he had been taught, as the firewood would be heavy and bulky.

"Can I trade meat for fruit please?"

"Sure thing. Which fruit do you want?"

Allen looked around and pointed at a yellow peach-like fruit that he had never seen before. "What's that?"

"That's popo. It's pretty expensive, kid. I can only give you one in exchange for a block of meat."

Oof, yeah, that's expensive. Guess I'll just stick to molmo after all. "I see. Then just the molmo, please."

Despite his insistence on this being for Mash's sake, Allen also had quite the sweet tooth himself. He could not very well go home without some fruit.

"By the way, how much would these be if I used money?"

The friendly old lady who tended this store readily answered a few more questions from Allen. He jotted down her answers alongside the observations that he had made on his previous trip.

```
These Things Are All the Same Value:
One block of albaheron meat (around 1 kg)
Two tablespoons of salt (around 30 g)
Four molmos
One popo
Four days' worth of firewood (around 60 kg)
```

The reason why fruit and salt were so expensive was because they had to be brought to town by traveling merchants. The storekeeper of the general store also taught Allen about the currencies in use, so he noted that information down as well.

```
These Things Are All the Same Value:
1 gold coin
100 silver coins
1,000 copper coins
10,000 iron coins
```

Allen was looking into the market prices of products and the currency of this country because it was his goal to make his entire family commoners. According to Gerda, this would require fifty gold coins total.

Based on the salt merchant's answer, one kilogram of albaheron meat is worth one silver coin. Each albaheron gives me about ten kilograms of meat, which means I'll only need to hunt five hundred albaherons. If I really go ham with hunting starting in October next year, I can probably earn the fifty gold coins in a few years.

Back when he was Kenichi, Allen had hunted a countless number of monsters in games. For a hardcore gamer, five hundred mobs was nothing. Depending on the specific game, he had even been killing tens of thousands every hour.

After having gotten a general idea of market prices in this village, Allen headed toward the firewood merchant. However, he spotted a drug store and a weapons store on his way. What looked like medicinal herbs could be seen through the open doors of the former. Allen had not been able to check it out the other day, as he had been following Gerda, but he was now alone and free to make whatever detours he wanted. He decided to take a look inside, his curiosity piqued.

"Excuse me."

"Mm, welcome."

There was a large variety of grasses and roots all over the interior of the store. The shopkeeper here, seated at the far end, was an old woman quite advanced in years.

“Um, do you have any medicine to help recover MP?”

“Spare me if you’re just here to jeer, boy. There’s no way we’d have something that expensive for sale.”

As it turned out, the herbs being sold at this store were only on the level of lowering fevers and making poultices to bandage wounds with.

“I see.” Hmm, so medicine to recover MP does exist but is very expensive. Guess I can’t expect to get my hands on any until I manage to acquire a steady, sizable income somehow.

The first time he fought with an albaheron, Allen had lost a lot of Summons during the fight itself. Every time another one got done in, not only did he lose a fighter, he also lost the stat buffs that the Summon’s card gave him. Because of the way his class worked, if he was ever facing an opponent strong enough to take down his Summons, the longer the fight went on, the less possible it would be for him to recover. This was why he was interested in items or potions that could help recover MP.

Even though Allen continued to examine and ask about various other things on display, and even though he was a six-year-old boy who clearly did not have much money, the shopkeeper showed no intention of chasing him out.

It was the same with the firewood and the salt merchants. They’re probably all commoners, but I don’t get the feeling like they’re giving me the cold shoulder just because I’m a serf.

“Which one is the medicine used for poultices?”

The old lady curtly jerked her chin. “Those, over there.”

Allen closely examined the dried herbs in the indicated area, wondering if most people were just curt and gruff in this world.

Hmm, I’ve never tried this before, but can I add images to the memo pages?

On the spur of the moment, Allen mentally tried to impress an image of the dried herbs into his grimoire. To his surprise, what looked like a pencil sketch appeared on the page.

Nice, it worked! I guess you never know till you try.

Up to now, Allen had been using the memo function of his grimoire for noting down results from his experiments, working out hypotheses, journaling, and keeping record of his memories from his previous world. Now he had learned that he could also use it to keep images of things. Just in case, he went around taking “pictures” of all the other herbs too.

Although his movement was greatly restricted at the moment due to him being a serf, once he gained his freedom, he could go in search of all these herbs in person.

Just as Allen was mentally sorting out which plants were medicinal, the one that had saved Rodin’s life suddenly came to his mind. He asked, “By the way, do you have a Flower of Muellerze here?”

“What?! Of course I don’t! Even if I did, I’d make you pay full price!”

Allen flinched slightly at the shopkeeper's sudden outburst. "Um, I'm sorry...?" he asked in a confused tone.

"Ah, no, I should be the one to apologize. I just had a terrible experience with one."

This is the place where Gerda bought the Flower of Muellerze that saved father, right? What happened?

Curious, Allen asked about what happened one and a half months ago. According to the shopkeeper, the man named Gerda rushed into her store and desperately begged her to sell him the most effective medicine she had for wounds. She fetched the single Flower of Muellerze she had in stock and told him it was worth five gold coins. When he heard that, the man begged her to sell it for three gold and promised to bring the money the next day.

The man did not look like someone who would have three gold coins, but he prostrated himself in the store, going on and on about saving his close friend's life. What's more, he promised to turn himself into a debt slave if he failed to bring the money the next day. In the end, the storekeeper folded and agreed to let him have the flower for three gold coins payable the next day. Sure enough, Gerda kept his word.

"The problem is, the herb could have easily fetched more than five gold in the feudal lord's city. I was planning on selling it to the next traveling merchant who came to town. I lost out big time on that deal."

The old woman continued repeating that she had lost out. When Allen nodded and indicated that he understood where she was coming from, she emphasized once again that even if she had one in stock at the moment, she would refuse to sell it for any price less than five gold.

Seeing that the story was over, Allen lowered his shoulder rack, grabbed a block of meat, and placed it on the counter.

"Hm? Which herb are you trading for?"

"I'm not trading. That's for you."

"What do you mean?" The old woman frowned in puzzlement, making her wrinkled face even wrinklier.

"Because you sold the flower at a discount, my father's life was saved. This is thanks from me. Thank you very, very much."

The shopkeeper looked on with an astonished face as Allen bowed deeply. After this day, whenever he came to the commercial district to shop, he would always make sure to drop by the drug store and leave another block of meat. The third time he did this, the old woman told him that was enough.

After leaving the drug store, Allen continued his exploration of the commercial district, the touching story of the close friendship between Rodin and Gerda still fresh in his mind.

Hmm, next door is a weapons store.

Although he had no plans to do so, Allen decided to drop in anyway. He ducked inside and called out, "Excuse me," but no reply came. Apparently

this was the kind of store where the storekeeper would not answer. The man himself was sitting in the back, though.

Wait, isn't he the father of the Ax User kid?

This man had been sitting at the same table as Allen during the feast at the village chief's house. As it turned out, he was the village's weapons merchant. Although he was not saying anything, he was staring right at Allen. It did not look like he had anything particular that he wanted to say, though, so Allen decided to ignore the gaze and browse the store.

I'd thought this was a weapons store, but it looks like it's also a hardware store. There are things like pots and carvers on sale.

This was a tiny settlement which had only barely received official acknowledgment as a full-fledged village. That was probably why this weapons store had stocked such a large variety of goods. It was similar to how convenience stores in rural Japan also sold locally produced vegetables.

I'm in no hurry, but it might be time to consider using something better than wooden swords.

The main reason why Allen had walked in was to find an upgrade to the weapon he was using to hunt albaherons. A few wooden swords had snapped on him so far, so he always made sure to bring a spare. However, sometimes he would not be able to draw in time, and therefore had to resort to using his bare hands to strangle his prey to death.

"How much is this short sword?"

"Fifty silver."

Unbeknownst to Allen, he was actually quite well-known throughout the village as Rodin's son. Rodin and Gerda had spearheaded the serfs' great boar hunting efforts from the village's very founding. This effectively made the two of them authorities among the serfs. And considering how seventy percent of the population in this village were serfs, that was quite a lot of influence.

Normally, a six-year-old boy in worn-out clothes asking the prices of weapons would come across as messing around. However, due to his connection to Rodin, the weapons merchant answered his questions earnestly.

I see. I picked this up because I thought it looked the cheapest here, but it's still fifty silver. In other words, it's worth five albaherons.

"How about a simple iron bar the size of this wooden sword? How much would that be?" Allen asked, pointing to the weapon at his waist.

"Hm, twenty silvers."

Oof, it's still quite expensive. That's still two albaherons.

Allen wanted to improve his gear, but he could not do so just for the sake of self-satisfaction. The albaheron meat was, at the end of the day, to be used for the entire family. And so he gave up and left the weapons store.

All right, it doesn't look like there's anything else for me to check out. Let's get the firewood and go home.

“Oh, you’re the kid from last time. Firewood again?”

Did he remember me from last time? “Yes, please. Here is the meat.”

Once again, Allen tied sixty kilograms of firewood to his shoulder rack and stood up easily. He bowed courteously to the merchant who went, “You really are something, kid,” then headed home. There were quite a lot of people out and about, as it was currently around ten o’clock in the morning. They all stared at the boy who was carrying firewood several times his weight.

As he continued walking, paying no mind to all the attention he was drawing, Allen suddenly found his way blocked by a familiar face. It was the boy with the country bumpkin face, Dogora.

“You really came! What are you here for, Black Hair?!”

Dogora had likely heard from his father, the weapons merchant, that Allen had come to the village center. Perhaps he considered this part of his turf, judging by how he seemed to be picking a fight.

“Hm? To buy firewood,” Allen answered coolly, trying to walk past Dogora and making it clear he had no intention of engaging with him.

“Hey, don’t ignore me! You running away?!” Dogora used the palm of his hand to push Allen’s chest, taking issue with the other boy’s attitude.

Allen backed away a few steps and readjusted the firewood on his back to regain his balance. “What’re you doing?”

“You can’t pass here!” Dogora declared with a wide smirk, convinced of his victory by Allen’s nonresistance. “I’ll let you pass only if you become my henchman.”

In response, Allen wordlessly went to lower his rack at the side of the road, out of the way of passersby. He recalled back to when he was gaming as Kenichi. At the time, he was somewhat famous among the gaming forums. Despite having a full-time job, it was not uncommon for people to refer to him as a gaming addict in comments. Normally “gaming addict” was a title reserved for those who had truly given over every aspect of their entire life to gaming. There were some who disagreed, but the general opinion was that normies who were plugged into real society—such as by being properly employed—could not earn this title.

Kenichi’s playstyle had been straightforward and simple: to get stronger, he would forge better weapons and kill higher-level mobs. He had zero interest in gathering unnecessary collectibles or training crafting skills that had no bearing on fighting strength. He also ignored all seasonal and holiday in-game events.

This of course meant that he did not care for PVP, or player-versus-player fights. He would not get XP—which meant he would not get stronger—from defeating other players. Therefore, his preferred opponents were monsters, not players. However, being famous meant he was subjected to “fame tax,” a term that referred to how those who were in the public spotlight would attract unwanted attention.

When Kenichi's in-game character went out to hunt, he would get attacked by "player killers," players who specifically hunted other players. Some did it for fun, some did it to steal people's equipment, and some for other reasons.

Kenichi's chosen response to those who hunted him was to beat them at their own game. He did not care if they were middle schoolers, housewives, or so-called "e-girls." He killed every last person who got in the way of his grinding.

Seeing Allen lowering his rack, Dogora asked, "Oh? You really want to be my henchman?"

"You seriously think that?" Allen responded, drawing the wooden sword from his hip. He held it up with both hands, keeping the tip at chest height.

"What?!" Dogora, who was unarmed, unconsciously took a step backward. He had not expected Allen to actually use the weapon that he was carrying.

"Well, come on. We doing this or what?"

"Th-That's so cheap!"

"Would you say the same on a battlefield, Knight of the Ax?"

Due to his three years of playing knight with Krena, Allen had gotten quite used to speaking like a knight. His words came out naturally.

"Huh?!"

"I'll wait. I don't care what—go get a weapon of your own, Sir Dogora, Knight of the Ax."

"You said it! Don't you dare run away!" Dogora rushed off, then came back in no time, carrying something huge in his hands. When he got close enough, Allen saw that it was a large, round pole that looked like a pestle. It had likely been just lying around in the weapons store.

Seeing Dogora simply hold the stick up, Allen asked provocatively, "You scared? Aren't you gonna attack?"

"RAAAAAAHHHH!" Red filled Dogora's face as the blood rushed to his head, and he charged forward, signaling the start of their playing knight.

The boy with a bumpkin face swung his weapon with brute force again and again, and the black-haired boy skillfully parried each and every one of those attacks with his wooden sword. There were quite a lot of spectators, but they all stayed silent.

So, he's an Ax User. I do remember a game I played having a class called Ax Warrior. Well, we started fighting but…what should I do about this?

Allen had not really thought things through before starting the fight. All he knew was that he should not draw blood, as this was not just a mere game. He continued racking his brains for how best to end this fight while continuing to deflect Dogora's onslaught.

"What—*huff*—What's wrong? *Haahh*, are *you* not—*gasp*—gonna attack?" Dogora asked in provocation, panting heavily from the exertion.

Allen gave him a measured look, then decided to put more strength into his parries, changing up the timing of his own swings so that he was not merely deflecting Dogora's blows.

It was now December, which meant albaheron hunting season was over. Harvesting was also done, and Rodin was recovering steadily. In short, there was no particular need for Allen to bolster his Strength stat anymore, so he had swapped out many of his Beast F cards with Grass F instead. The more MP he had, the more he could train his skills. Even so, he had left himself with more strength than the average adult, to say nothing of a child near his own age.

"*OOF!*" Dogora was sent flying even though Allen's blow had landed on his weapon, not him directly. He swore and was about to get back up when he found the tip of a wooden sword right in front of his nose.

“You still want to continue?” Allen asked.

Dogora growled with frustration. He was completely out of breath. Although he continued glaring, he made no move to stand up, so Allen went to shoulder his rack again.

“Sir Dogora, Knight of the Ax.”

“Wh-What?”

“I’ll be passing by again two days later at this same time.”

“Huh?!”

Allen shot Dogora, who was still on the ground, one final look before resuming making his way home.

□ □ □

The year turned, spring came and left, and it was now early September. The late summer heat still lingered in the air. Allen would be turning seven next month. The sun beat down on him mercilessly as he stood in the garden of Krena’s house.

“I’m fighting you next, Allen.”

“Come at me any time, Dogora.”

Dogora tightened his grip on his club, then rushed toward Allen.

“Dammit, why can’t I hit you?”

“As I keep saying, I’m predicting your moves.”

“I *know* that!”

These two were currently playing knight. The reason for this could be traced back to December of the previous year. Two days after they fought for the first time, Allen was making his way back home from trading for his family’s necessities when he found Dogora waiting for him once more, raring to go. This time, the other boy had brought a club instead of a pestle, likely due to it being easier to use as a weapon.

Dogora had been hoping to take revenge, but Allen once again managed an overwhelming victory as a matter of course. Dogora had said, “We’re doing this again in two days!” This eventually continued all the way till the end of December.

However, by then Allen had gathered more than enough firewood and salt for his family to last the winter, what with having come visit the village center almost every other day for a whole month. When he told Dogora that he would be cutting back the frequency of his visits starting in January, Dogora said, “You running away?!”

So Allen consulted Krena and asked if she would be interested in letting Dogora join their playing knight sessions. She immediately agreed, ecstatic about gaining a new playmate. The next day, Allen told Dogora to come to Krena’s house if he wanted to fight again. The boy replied, “You got it!” on the spot. After that, the three of them began to meet at Krena’s house practically every day. They used Krena’s house as the gathering point because hers was closer to the residential area than Allen’s. And that more or less summed up the current situation.

“Hah! Sir Pelomas the Knight! Is that all you got?!”

“Ugh… YAAAH!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Allen watched Krena and Pelomas, the village chief’s son, in the middle of their own match. Dogora had invited Pelomas to come, as the two of them had been friends beforehand. Their friendship was the reason why Dogora and his father had sat at the same table as the knight captain during the feast at the village chief’s house.

Pelomas’s dream was to become a merchant in the future, and so he was rather half-hearted about playing knight. His general attitude made it very clear that he had been dragged here by Dogora against his will. Even so, he still showed up every second or third day. The reason for this lay with his father, the village chief. These play knight sessions were an opportunity to play together and forge a relationship with Krena, a Sword Lord who might even serve the royal family in the future. Pelomas found himself both pushed forward by his father and dragged along by Dogora. There was nowhere for him to escape.

There was one other person who was participating in these play knight sessions—Mash, who had turned three in December. Theresia had granted him permission to leave the house so long as he was with Allen. As such, ever since the play sessions had been relocated to Krena’s house, he had been coming almost every day.

In total, there were five children: Allen, Krena, Mash, Dogora, and Pelomas.

“Mash, here I come!”

“Okay, Allen!”

Mash’s weapon was quite long; he was not using a sword, but a spear.

At first, Allen had made Mash a wooden sword that matched his smaller size. However, he suddenly begged to have a go at using Allen’s sword, which was twice his in length. Allen handed it over and watched in concern as his younger brother handled the weapon that was nearly the same size as him, but then realized that his movements had actually improved. In short, using a spear suited Mash more than using a sword did. Based on this information, Allen had then made a more spear-like weapon for his brother.

“Yah!”

“That’s good, Mash.”

So this is Talent. I’m looking forward to his Appraisal Ceremony two years from now.

Mash’s thrusts were sharp and accurate. What’s more, they were improving further by the day. Allen firmly believed that Mash possessed a class related to using the spear, though there was no way to confirm this until he was Appraised as a five-year-old.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

“Aw shucks, it’s already time?”

“C’mon, Dogora, let’s go home.”

It was the three o’clock bell. Dogora and Pelomas always went home at this time. Because they would head over at the noon bell and arrive at around one o’clock, the playing knight sessions lasted roughly two hours for the two of them. The boys bade farewell to the other three children and headed off.

After playing a while longer, Allen and Mash also left for home. At first, Mash would get so exhausted from these play sessions that he would beg Allen to give him piggybacks, but now, he was strong enough to make it back on his own two feet. Allen could not have been happier to witness his younger brother’s growth.

“We’re home!” the two boys cried out in unison as they stepped through the door.

“Welcome back, Allen, Mash,” Theresia answered from within. She was currently busy preparing dinner with her youngest child on her back. Allen hurried forward to help out.

This past February, Theresia had given birth to her third child without incident, a baby girl this time. As Theresia and Rodin had agreed that she would get to name all their daughters and he would get to name all the sons, she finally got her chance. She went with Myulla, derived from the Flower of Muellerze that had saved Rodin’s life. She had apparently decided on this name even before the child was born.

Allen honestly thought that, between his parents, his mother had the better naming sense. After all, “Allen” and “Mash” were both derived from monster names. Allen was now more than familiar with the monster that his name was based on, but he had yet to have the chance to meet Mash’s.

Once, while going on a supplies run with Gerda, Allen had asked him about the murdergalsh. As it turned out, this monster had once been responsible for blocking salt and fruit from reaching the village.

Murdergalshes were solitary creatures and would wander wherever they wanted. They kept no nests and had no interest in territory. Its appearance was like that of a giant wolf. It was supposedly twice as huge as a great boar, but Gerda said even he had never seen one in person before.

These monsters would sometimes temporarily settle down on the roads that ran between villages and cities. When this happened, the merchants and travelers that normally traversed those roads would have no choice but to either give up the journey or double back to take a huge detour. As a Rank B monster, the murdergalsh was not easy to defeat. There were times one would stay put for over a month, severely impacting the flow of goods and people. When that happened, the feudal lord’s chivalric order would be dispatched.

Gerda said he had vivid memories of when this had happened to another village. However, when the knights arrived on scene, the monster had already up and left for somewhere else. In the end, there was no subjugation.

Allen's impression was that the murdergalsh was a monster that caused a lot of trouble all around. At the very least, it did not sound like the type that anyone would take a liking to. He stared at his younger brother, who was currently listlessly rolling about, and hoped that he would grow up into someone whom everyone would love.

"I'm back," Rodin announced. He had made a complete recovery, returning to the fields in spring to sow the seeds. Now, he was back to being the one carrying fresh water every morning. Other than that, he spent the majority of his days in the fields.

Allen was also applying himself to farming, learning from his father. However, he did this only in the mornings. When he had suggested helping out the entire day, it was Gerda, not Rodin, who stopped him. The large man had even grabbed both of Allen's shoulders, heavily stressing that "children should play outside while they're children." Allen still remembered how tightly Gerda had gripped him and how much it had hurt. So he now passed his days helping out in the fields in the morning and playing knight in the afternoons. Every day was very busy.

The family gathered around the sunken fireplace in the main room of the house and ate dinner. Spittle dribbled down Myulla's face as Theresia spoon-fed her baby food, which was slowly being incorporated into her diet. Allen, who was starving from all the exercise he had gotten in the afternoon, devoured the steamed potatoes voraciously.

"You came home pretty late today," Theresia suddenly said to Rodin.

In light of what had happened before, she would now get worried whenever Rodin returned late. He knew this and therefore would do his best to come home on time, but today had ended up being an exception.

"Mm, Deboji summoned me again," Rodin answered, his brows drawing together into a frown.

Anger and alarm flashed through Theresia's face, as Rodin's huge injury last year had also been set off by a similar visit to the village chief's house. She inadvertently leaned forward toward Rodin and asked anxiously, "Wh-What did he say?!"

Rodin froze, still holding onto his soup bowl and wooden spoon. Silence filled the air as he seemed to struggle for words, but he eventually said gravely, "He wants us to double the number of great boars we hunt to twenty in two years. To do this, he wants us to expand the hunting party to include both commoners and serfs."

What Theresia feared the most had proven to be true. She blurted, "What?! B-But that's...! After last year! He can't be serious!" Because her sudden outburst had caused Myulla to burst into tears, she had to reach over and pacify her in a fluster.

"Father, can we continue this conversation after I put Myulla and Mash to bed?"

Both Rodin and Theresia looked over at Allen in surprise, "Huh?" escaping their lips at the same time. Their son was still spooning soup into

his mouth calmly as if nothing had happened. The sight of it helped the two adults calm down somewhat and they resumed eating.

After dinner was over, Allen tucked Myulla and Mash in. Once he confirmed that they were fast asleep, he came out to the main room and found both Rodin and Theresia sitting silently, their heads lowered. Theresia was using both hands to slowly swirl a cup filled with boiled water, now lukewarm after cooling down.

“So, can we hear the rest of the story, father?”

“Mm.”

Rodin proceeded to go into detail. He had visited the village chief’s house together with Gerda, and was told that they had two years to double the number of great boars they hunted. What’s more, this was not a request from the village chief, but from the feudal lord directly.

The feudal lord had been making annual inquiries for the past few years about increasing the amount of meat sent to the city. Deboji had then conveyed the question to Rodin and Gerda, who had responded “no” every time. It had always been the same party of roughly twenty people, and there were no suitable candidates to add to their numbers. It was not as if they were turning away interested applicants either, as shown by their acceptance of the five commoners last year. However, the serfs all had families, and they valued their lives more than the meat. Their families naturally shared the same sentiment.

“So, you turned Deboji down this time too, right?” Theresia asked worriedly.

“The thing is, the feudal lord said that if we can’t ramp up our efforts by hunting fifteen great boars this year, he’ll gather more serfs from elsewhere in the domain.”

In other words, when it came to increasing the number of great boar hunts, the feudal lord was no longer taking no as an answer. If necessary, he was willing to displace serfs from other nearby villages and settle them in this one just to bolster the hunting party’s numbers with the hope of raising their output. This suggestion was based on the assumption that there would be serfs in other villages willing to join the hunts.

“So, you mean…increasing the number of serfs in our village?”

“Right. Which might cause the amount of land that each family can work to go down. That, or those who don’t go hunting might have all their land given to the newcomers.”

At the end of the day, serfs did not own the land they tilled. They had no right to. A single word from their feudal lord, and the land they had been nurturing for generations could be taken away in the blink of an eye.

“Th-That’s…!” Theresia was shocked beyond words. Allen now understood why Rodin’s face looked so clouded.

“Gerda and I discussed increasing the frequency of our hunts. There’s no other way to bring back more game. We’re gathering everyone together tomorrow to talk it over.”

“Even if you manage to make do somehow, when the quota is raised to twenty next year and the year after, you’re still going to have to accept more serfs into the village,” Allen said suddenly, speaking up for the first time since the start of this conversation. “That and, when you raise the frequency of the hunts, you might have hunting party members drop out.”

There was a reason why the party had left around ten days between each hunt. All the members were weighing the burden of hunting against their own livelihoods. They would get more meat the more hunts they went, true, but the danger they were exposing themselves to would also go up in proportion.

“Wha— You…do have a point.” Rodin was surprised to hear Allen calmly analyzing the situation, but had been thinking the same thing himself.

“So ultimately, you’d still need more members in the party.”

“That’s right. But we tried that last year and failed. I don’t even know if there’s anyone else willing to join, and even if there is, more people are just going to make the hunts more complicated.”

Rodin’s response to Allen was serious and direct. When Rodin had gotten injured, it was Allen who had harvested the fields, done the house chores, and looked after Mash. He even put himself in harm’s way fighting against albaherons, Rank D monsters, multiple times so that the family could make it through the winter. Because of how much he had done, Rodin now spoke to him not as a child, but as an equal.

I never thought I’d have to rely on my cover story for something like this. But, well, I guess this gives me credibility. Allen looked at his parents’ faces in turn, then said, “I have the wisdom that Elmea gave me.”

The two looked back at him with astonished faces as they recalled what he had shared before, about the Trials and the blessings that the gods had bestowed him with.

“Can you let me try to solve this problem my way?” Allen continued. “I have a feeling I can do something about it.”

In short, Allen was declaring that he had a solution, thanks to the wisdom that the gods had granted him.

□ □ □

The next day, Gerda found himself summoned to Allen and Rodin’s house. After all, he was the other leader of the hunting effort; big decisions would naturally need his agreement.

“Allen, is it true that you know how to increase the number of hunters and keep it safe?”

Gerda did not trust Allen as deeply as Rodin did. He was, after all, a six-year-old boy who had never even seen a great boar hunt in person.

“I can’t guarantee that it’d be absolutely safe.” *After all, there are no absolutes when hunting.*

“What?!”

“Huh?!”

Surprise and disappointment filled both Rodin’s and Gerda’s faces.

“However, this hunting method is definitely safer than what you’ve been doing so far. In the first place, assigning newcomers to the all-important shield wall is a terrible idea.” *They probably have low levels and therefore low stats. Their defense would be weaker than tofu.*

Back when Allen was Kenichi, he had spent dozens of thousands of hours grinding to make his in-game characters as strong as possible. That took various forms and methods, be it hunting solo or in a party, staying still in one area or moving about according to spawn points. He would change up what he did according to the specific mob and zone.

The method currently used by Rodin and Gerda’s hunting party involved drawing a great boar to the hunting ground, keeping it in place with a shield wall, and then finishing it off. In games, this was called “fishing” or “pulling.”

Of course, training up newcomers required experience too, especially if safety was a concern. There were many considerations and precautions when incorporating someone new into a party.

“So what? You saying you have a better idea?”

“Of course. I’ll explain it now. And one more thing.”

“What?”

“I’m also coming along on the next hunt.”

After declaring his intention on being a part of the great boar hunts going forward, Allen proceeded to share his idea for how best to safely incorporate newcomers into the hunting party.

Chapter 10: Great Boar Hunting

It was now October, and Allen had turned seven.

“All right, we’re off.”

“We’re off, mother.”

“Take care, Rodin, Allen.”

Theresia gave Rodin a kiss and Allen a hug. The hug was very tight, almost as if this was a final farewell.

Rodin threw his usual bag—filled with his hunting tools, food, and water—over his shoulder and tied it diagonally across his back. It was larger than normal today as it also contained Allen’s rations. He then picked up his hunting spear.

Both Rodin and Gerda had ended up accepting Allen’s suggested changes to the great boar hunting strategy. Today, they were going to put them into practice. Allen would finally get his chance to see a hunt in person.

When Allen and Rodin stopped by Gerda’s house to pick him up, they found him waiting next to Mathilda—who was holding Lily—and Krena.

“Alleeeeen! I wanna go tooooo!” Krena cried, grabbing Allen’s arm and shaking it vigorously.

“Once you’re a bit older, okay?” Gerda admonished with a troubled look on his face.

“Whaaaaat? Why does Allen get to go, then?” Krena asked, her cheeks puffed in indignation.

“I’m just going along to observe,” Allen replied, calming her down by patting her head.

As he said, Allen was not going to directly participate in today’s hunt. Although his idea had been accepted, the adults did not give him permission to join in. He had spent a whole hour trying to argue his point, but Rodin was resolute and refused to budge.

Eventually, Allen folded and asked if he could at least come along to observe. Rodin still shook his head, but Allen insisted that it was necessary for him to see whether his strategy worked or not in person. In the end, the two struck a compromise with Allen promising to stay a good distance away from the action.

After that, Allen asked when he would actually be able to participate. Rodin’s response was, “When you turn ten.” In this world, children in serf families began helping out at ten, and the age of adulthood was fifteen. Allen, however, thought that there was not much of a difference between seven and ten.

Do I seriously have to wait three more years to join in? I really want that great boar XP, though. I’ve gotta think of something.

For Allen, XP was everything. Since it was now October, he intended on resuming his albaheron hunting. However, he wanted XP from the great

boar hunts too. Although officially he would be going along only to observe, he was racking his brain for a way to get in on the action somehow.

Mm, my card distribution is just right.

Allen currently had his cards arranged in what he called Hunting Mode. Even though he would not be able to take part in today's hunt, he needed this loadout to hunt albaherons. And now that he was seven years old, the restriction on his stats had relaxed somewhat, with the scaling increased from sixty percent to seventy percent. Allen loved looking at the higher numbers so much he would check his grimoire every once in a while.

Name: Allen
Age: 7
Class: Summoner
Level: 2
HP: 45 (65) + 75
MP: 42 (60) + 35
Attack: 16 (24) + 75
Endurance: 16 (24) + 18
Agility: 35 (51) + 28
Intelligence: 49 (70) + 10
Luck: 35 (51) + 35
Skills: Summoning {3}, Creation {3}, Synthesis {3}, Strengthening {3}, Expansion {2}, Deletion, Sword Mastery {3}, Throwing {3}
XP: 600/2,000
Skill LevelsSummoning: 3
Creation: 3
Synthesis: 3
Strengthening: 3
Skill ExperienceCreation: 51,418/100,000
Synthesis: 51,410/100,000
Strengthening: 51,400/100,000
Creatable SummonsInsect: F, G, H
Beast: F, G, H
Bird: F, G
Grass: F
HolderInsect: F x 3, G x 3
Beast: F x 15
Bird: F x 2
Grass: F x 7

After raising Strengthening to Lvl. 3, Allen diligently continued converting his MP into Skill XP every day. At the current pace, he would reach Summoning Lvl. 4 next year. And now, thanks to Strengthening Lvl. 3,

Allen's Summons received +50 to the two stats corresponding with the buffs he received. This made them even more effective in battle.

Soon, Allen's group passed through the village square and reached the gate to the village, the gathering place this morning for all those who would be participating in today's great boar hunt. Everyone present was holding spears.

"Oh, there you guys are!" someone shouted, prompting all eyes to turn around. There were whispers along the lines of "He really brought his kid!" but no one voiced their opposition out loud. Rodin had given his permission for Allen to come along as an observer and Gerda had expressed his agreement. The rest of the serfs trusted these two's judgment.

What's more, Allen himself had also proved, over the past year, that he possessed incredible strength. Many people had witnessed him drawing water and going out to buy firewood. It was precisely because this world functioned on a leveling system and it was indeed possible for people to display unbelievable power that everyone seemed to have taken this in stride.

"We'll set off once everyone's here. We even have two newcomers today. Let's all get fired up and do this properly!" Rodin shouted to rally the others, prompting an enthusiastic "OHHHHH!" in response. Some even wiped away tears at seeing this leader of theirs returning to action after an entire year away.

Because there were still members of the party who had not yet arrived, the group continued waiting. The two newcomers, both of whom were commoners, were already present. They were among the five who had participated last year. Just like the serfs, they were holding spears and waiting patiently at the gathering point.

There were two ways to increase the number of great boars hunted beyond the ten per year that the group had managed so far. First would be to increase the frequency of the hunts—more hunts would mean more great boars. Second would be to increase the number of hunters to where there could be two hunting parties—this would double the number of great boars hunted. Both methods, however, required the same thing: more hunters.

For now, our task is to demonstrate how we can incorporate these two newcomers into the hunts safely. Then we can think about gathering even more people. That's why we're starting with only two this time, then only accepting more at a controlled pace.

When the last person arrived, this time it was Gerda who shouted, "All right, we're all here. Let's go!" The rest roared their answer before the entire group started filing out of the village gates.

Seven years after being born as a serf, I finally get to see the outside world.

Deboji, the village chief, had given official permission for Allen to leave the village for this outing, as Rodin and Gerda teaming up together to ask for something gave their request significant weight. He did look somewhat

doubtful when the two told him that this was necessary for today's hunt, but did not press the matter.

Allen could not help but gasp with emotion as the wooden gates opened up, revealing the world beyond. The path connected to the village was clear enough to be a road but was not very well-maintained. This was the same passage the knights had traveled when they visited the village previously.

"Allen, let's go. It's this way," Rodin called out, seeing his son standing still.

As it turned out, the hunting party was not using the road. After leaving the gate, they circled around the walls of the village, heading toward a rather dense forest a ways off in the distance.

The first hunting ground is three hours' walk away, if I remember correctly.

What with there being newcomers today, the plan was to do the hunt at the site closest to the village. Even so, there was still a bit of a distance to hike. Along the way, Allen reconfirmed with Rodin and Gerda the strategy they were going to employ today.

Halfway through the conversation, one of the newcomers approached the three and said to Rodin, "Sir, I'm going to do my best today!"

Hm? I feel like I've seen him before...

"Mm. Well, today should be easier than last year," Rodin replied. "Don't wind yourself up too tight."

Oh, right, he's the guy who visited our house that one time last year. He's joining this year too, huh.

Apparently when Rodin had informed Deboji that the hunting party was looking to accept two newcomers and Deboji spread the word, this young man had been one of the first to step forward. He wanted to be of use this time to make up for his previous failure. The other serfs had accepted him with open arms, appreciative of his desire to make things right.

The procession of a total of twenty-three, including the newcomers and Allen, soon reached the forest. They continued making their way in deeper, heading for the hunting grounds.

Still, why is the feudal lord so fixated on making us increase the number we hunt? Considering how he's been asking about it for several years now, this can't be just a temporary whim. There must be a larger reason behind it. Hold on. That night, during our dinner at the village chief's house... Didn't the knight captain say that the most pressing concern of this fiefdom currently is procuring food?

As he continued trudging forward, Allen racked his brains for reasons why the feudal lord would want more food. Eventually, he came up with three.

Reason 1: The main industry that this fiefdom had been relying on all this time is dying out, leading to the need to be self-sufficient in terms of food.

Reason 2: The feudal lord realized how much money he could make from taxing all the great boar meat and is greedy for more.
Reason 3: There is a shortage of food within the fiefdom or within the kingdom as a whole.

All seem likely, but I'd place my bets on the first or second. Seeing as how there are still traveling merchants bringing fruit to our village to trade, I don't think we're running out of food.

Even Allen did not notice it about himself, but his method of thinking about things was starting to change. Being able to step outside the village for the first time in seven years seemed to have pushed him toward considering matters from a larger perspective.

"All right, we're here!" Rodin shouted, prompting everyone to stop.

This was a rather sizable clearing that had more than enough space for twenty people to hunt in. The group could finally take a breather after walking for hours on end. Everyone retrieved their dried potatoes and waterskins from their luggage.

Gerda asked, "Pekej, got a minute?" prompting a man munching on a potato to come over. The two proceeded to do a final confirmation on details of the day's hunt—such as where to draw the game from—by drawing it out on the ground. Allen sat together with them to listen in.

The hunters were going to be split into three major teams. Because of this, there was a need for three leaders. Aside from Rodin and Gerda, the third one would be this man, Pekej. And how his team performed would determine the survival of the entire hunting party.

When Pekej said, "We'll be searching in the north today," Gerda marked it in their diagram on the ground.

Pekej's team, Team One, was in charge of drawing a single great boar to this clearing. This was the role that Allen, from his days as a gamer, referred to as "pulling" or "fishing." The general idea was to attract the desired enemy and draw it toward where one's allies were lying in wait.

This team had the fewest number of people—including Pekej, there were only three total. With a simple "All right, we're off," each of them grabbed a stick and disappeared into the trees. The sticks they were armed with were not spears but something more similar to Allen's wooden sword. That was the tool they needed to do their "fishing."

Great boars were scattered throughout this forest, but they were not necessarily always by themselves. Some wandered around alone, but some would be in pairs or trios. There would be no problem if the pullers encountered a great boar by itself. However, if it was a group of three, and they led all three boars to the hunting party, the party would be overrun and everyone could very well die. In such cases, the pullers needed to lead only one toward the hunting grounds while drawing the remaining two in the opposite direction to lose them in the woods. This was why three men were needed to "fish" a single great boar.

The population of great boars in this forest would explode in autumn. As such, it would not take too long to find and pull one to the hunting ground.

Beyond this forest is the White Dragon Mountains, right? I wonder if it's related somehow. Allen was curious why the boars would increase in number so significantly in autumn, but apparently neither Rodin nor Gerda knew the details. All they knew was that beyond the forest were the White Dragon Mountains, a mountain range where a white dragon resided. Rodin posited that perhaps the great boars normally lived at the foot of these mountains and came to the forest in autumn in search of food.

I can't see the mountain from here. Is it actually quite far away? I can't see anything with all these trees in the way.

"IT'S HEEEEERRRE!"

Pekej burst out from the forest, his shout interrupting Allen's thoughts. The other two pullers were nowhere to be seen. In other words, the team must have encountered a group of three great boars, and the other two were still in the middle of losing their respective boars.

"GUMOOOOHHH!"

CRAAAASH!

The great boar had arrived. Just as it was about to crush Pekej under its hooves, the man ducked behind a large tree. In the brief window when the boar slowed down after colliding with the tree, Pekej dashed through the lines of the hunting party's main force.

Gerda led the team in charge of this next part. All eleven members of this team—the largest team among the three—were ready and waiting. The giant body of the three-meter-tall great boar came charging in, spraying drool everywhere. It bore not only huge, vicious-looking tusks but also numerous horns on top of its snout.

Damn, that's a terrifying sight all right. I get why the newcomers freaked out. So this is what a Rank C monster is like.

Allen was watching everything unfold from further back. It was quite a distance, but even he could feel the tremors caused by the monster's stomping. He found himself somewhat overwhelmed by the scene.

"HERE WE GOOOO! EVERYONE, BRAAAAACE!"

"RAAAAAHHHHH!"

"GUMOOOOHHH!"

The group Gerda led, Team Two, was in charge of surrounding and stopping the great boar. They were equipped with two-meter-long spears—any longer and they might snap with the strain—that had broad spearheads on the end. These had been modified specifically for hunting great boars.

As the boar made contact with the wall of spears, the men roared with vigor and desperately braced themselves. If they lost their footing, they would be impaled with the monster's fangs and horns. The eleven all gritted their teeth and worked as one to offset the momentum of the charge.

When Team Two managed to lock the great boar's head down with their spears, Gerda shouted, "All right! It's stopped! Surround it! Rodin, do your thing!"

"You got it!" Rodin roared in response. "Y'all, let's go!"

"RAAAAAHHH!"

There were six people in Rodin's group, Team Three. They split into two smaller groups of three each, each approaching the boar's flank from opposing sides to deal the killing blow. They were aiming for the creature's jugular. The great boar's head was huge and tough, and its back was also protected by very sturdy hide. The best way to kill it, therefore, was to deliver a fatal wound to its throat, which was relatively softer than all the other parts of its body.

This was a very structured hunt, with everyone having well-defined roles. After doing this for ten years, they all knew what they were doing, and their teamwork was perfect.

Everything so far is just as I'd been told. Okay, my idea should work, then. Allen turned to the two newcomers who were on standby next to himself and said, "It's time. Do it like how my father taught you, please."

"O-Okay."

"Off we go."

This was finally the point when these two would get involved. They gripped their spears and stepped forward to join the mass of hunters struggling against the great beast, taking up position behind Gerda's team.

"Excuse us, coming in from behind!" they shouted in unison as the both of them thrust their spears over Team Two's shoulders.

"All right! Don't accidentally hit us!" Gerda responded over the ruckus.

The strategy that Allen had suggested to Rodin and Gerda this time was very simple. While the serfs used spears that were two meters long, the ones issued to the commoners this time were double that length at four meters. With these in hand, they could attack from behind the team holding the boar.

Team One was in charge of pulling, Team Two was in charge of stopping the great boar and holding it down, and Team Three was in charge of finishing the beast off. All of them were inappropriate for including inexperienced newcomers—worst case, someone would die. And so Allen made the case that newcomers should not be put into any of the existing teams but should just stab from behind Team Two.

Under the furious barrage of stabs, the monster let out one final deafening squeal. Someone had finally managed to pierce its throat, unleashing a huge fountain of blood. The beast's movements gradually grew sluggish until its body ultimately slumped over, sending a tremor through the ground.

Yes! Everything went perfectly!

Just as Rodin and Gerda stepped forward to confirm the kill, the two commoners whooped loudly.

“AHHH! I OVERCAME A TRIAL!!!”

“TH-THE POWER! IT’S WELLING UP! THANK YOU, GOD!”

Seemingly having leveled up, they cheered loudly about overcoming a Trial of the Gods and stared at the spears they were holding, their hands trembling with emotion.

So just thrusting their spears from the back still gave them enough XP to level up. In fact, since they’re in Normal Mode, I assume they gained several levels from that single kill. Though they probably only perceived it as a single instance of “overcoming a Trial of the Gods.”

Allen summoned his grimoire to check if he had gotten anything. He looked over at the cover, but unfortunately, there was no new entry in the log.

Gah! As I thought, I won’t get any XP just standing here.

Although Allen had expected this, getting the confirmation was still quite a downer. The strategy had gone well, but he himself had gotten nothing out of it. *What a pity.*

With this, the idea for incorporating newcomers that Allen had come up with was confirmed to be effective and was adopted.

□ □ □

Early one morning, several days after the first great boar hunt of the year, Allen headed to the community well closest to his house to draw water. He had set off at the 6 a.m. bell, but there was already a whole line when he arrived.

“Good morning!” Allen greeted in a loud voice. Grabbing everyone’s attention was important.

“Oh! Rodin’s kid! Good morning to you too.”

Allen recognized several faces in line. They were serfs who had been part of the hunt a few days ago.

“You coming again tomorrow, kiddo?”

“Of course! In fact, I want to go every time. Someone, please help convince my father to let me hold a spear!” Allen made a face, trying his best to convey how troubled he felt about Rodin not allowing him to participate in the hunt directly.

“Uh, if we did that, Rodin would make sure we never saw the light of day again.”

Laughter sprang up around the well. Some of the other serfs, however, looked jealous.

“You guys have it good. I want to take part in the hunts too.”

“What’re you saying, man? You’re the one choosing to stay behind with the butchering group. We always welcome more people. I heard we’re getting two *more* newcomers tomorrow. And Rodin’s kid here is coming along to observe.”

“I’d love to, but my old lady’s got another one in her belly now. It’s too dangerous out there. I can’t risk leaving her all alone.”

The first round of what Allen called the Long Spear Newcomer Induction Plan had gone over as a complete success. Consequently, the hunting party was now looking to accept two more newcomers on top of the two from last time. The idea was to slowly increase the group's numbers, two at a time, helping them level up along the way.

Although it was safer now thanks to Allen's strategy, there were still those unable to participate. The very act of facing a great boar in person still, at the end of the day, required one to put their life on the line. Allen had seen the three-meter-tall monster for himself. He knew there was no guarantee that everyone would return home safe and sound.

"Fair enough. Well, we're doing them once every six days this year, so if you ever feel like it, just let any of us know."

"You bet I will. I still need to get meat for my missus. Our fields are small, so honestly, it'd be a help just being able to participate in more butcherings."

Oh? He might do.

Allen turned toward the serf who had only been participating in the butcherings. "Excuse me, mister?"

"I'm not quite old enough to be called 'mister,' but, what's the matter, kiddo?"

"Can I ask you to help me with something?"

This was what Allen was actually aiming for this morning. He asked the man to come to his house at 9 a.m., then filled his buckets and headed back first. When the time came, the man showed up at Allen's house.

"Oh, good morning again, mister! Thank you for coming!"

"'Mister' again… Ahem. I don't mind coming. What'd you need me for?"

Seeing the man's eyes wander toward the rack set up above the ditch beside his house, Allen said, "I caught them just now."

There were two albaherons currently hung up. The sight of blood trickling from their open necks caused the visitor to start a little. Allen turned to lead the way, gesturing for him to follow.

"Th-This is…!"

There were albaheron carcasses stacked up into a whole pile. Ever since it turned October, Allen had resumed his albaheron hunting. He had informed Rodin that he would be focusing on it throughout the entire month before finally helping out with the harvest in November. Rodin agreed readily, as he could actually manage on his own and therefore had no need to rely on Allen's aid.

Because his afternoons were now dedicated to playing knight, Allen did his hunting in the mornings, catching one to three albaheron every day. Of course, he did the hunting in a fallow field on Rodin's land—it was a different one from last year, as that one was now growing crops.

Thanks to having perfected his hunting strategy last year, Allen's catches continued piling up. Now, he had no problem with the hunting process itself, but he did have a new problem—he could not butcher his

catches in time. Unprocessed carcasses kept piling higher and higher in his yard.

Allen did consider asking Rodin to help with the butchering. However, Rodin had his work with the fields, and whatever spare time he had, he spent it training the hunting party's newcomers. All things considered, Rodin was even busier than Allen was.

Currently, of the twelve albaherons that Allen had hunted in the past five days, only five were actually butchered. And so he had come up with the idea to ask someone else to take care of the remaining seven.

"I see. So you want me to butcher these birds."

"For each one you do, I'll give you two blocks of meat."

"Huh? That's a mighty good deal. You sure about that?"

Allen indicated his confirmation.

For the sake of earning the fifty gold coins that would be needed to free his whole family from serfdom, Allen had visited the butcher in the commercial area of the village the other day to ask how much he would accept meat for. The man had replied that unlike goods bartering, if Allen wanted to sell meat for actual money, he would charge twenty percent as surcharge, or forty percent if the game was not butchered yet. The butcher had to make money from the transaction too, after all.

With this in mind, Allen decided to ask a fellow serf who was in need of meat to do the butchering instead. The reward that he was offering was the same rate as what the butcher would charge to do the butchering—twenty percent. The reason why he did this was because entire albaheron carcasses would be much harder to carry to the commercial area as opposed to neatly packaged blocks of meat.

So, one albaheron nets me six silver coins. Eight if I do the butchering myself, but butchering doesn't raise my level and hunting does, so it's more effective to focus solely on hunting and leveling up while outsourcing the butchering to someone else.

Back when Allen was Kenichi, he maintained a single-minded focus on leveling up. Whenever he got his hands on an item, he would immediately exchange it for money. Not once did he stop to try enchanting or upgrading what he picked up. The way he saw things was, if he ever needed anything, he could always just buy it from the players focusing on the crafting aspects of the game.

"Oh, mister. Albaheron liver is really delicious, did you know? For every five albaherons you butcher for me, I'll let you keep one liver."

"Are you serious?!"

Organs did not sell well as they would go bad very quickly. Even after securing a portion for his family and the families of Krena, Dogora, and Pelomas, there were still leftovers. Allen's idea was to reward whoever came and dedicated themselves to the butchering work with a share.

The serf happily accepted the offer. Allen nodded in acknowledgment, then began explaining how he wanted the albaherons to be butchered.

□ □ □

Night came and went, and it was now the following day, the day of the second great boar hunt of the year. Because the party had two brand-new newcomers again, they would be using the hunting ground closest to the village, just like last time. This was to avoid the possibility of encountering a great boar inside the forest while making their way toward a deeper hunting ground. The risk was not all that high, as Team One, the pullers, would be going ahead anyways, but there was no need to intentionally increase the chances of danger, no matter how slight.

Soon, the procession reached the clearing, and the pullers were off. The rest remained behind and got into position according to their teams.

The two latest newcomers today looked quite nervous. While they happened to be commoners again, the call for new hunting party members had indeed gone out to the serfs as well, and there were already several names on a wait list. The way the previous newcomers had returned not only unharmed, but proudly boasting about overcoming a Trial of the Gods had proved effective in arousing other villagers' interest.

Just like last time, Allen was coming along as an observer. Because he would not be contributing directly to the hunt, he was not going to receive a cut of the meat. The four long spear-wielders—the sign of being a newcomer—were going to get half the amount the other hunters would receive. This idea had also been Allen's. In short, those with the two-meter-long spears would receive ten kilograms of meat, those with the four-meter-long spears would receive five kilograms, and those only doing the butchering would receive three kilograms. This ratio was decided relative to the degree of danger that those in each role would be exposed to.

The newcomers were currently focused on raising their levels. Once they had gone through a few hunts, they would be assigned to the team that, stat-wise, they were most suitable for. Each team required different stat builds according to their duties.

Team One, the pullers, needed high Agility.

Team Two, the surrounders, needed high Endurance.

Team Three, those dealing the final blow, needed Attack.

When Allen first heard of this idea of splitting into three teams, the first thing he thought of was the Appraisal Ceremony. Everyone in the party was likely Talentless, which meant their stats were probably somewhere between Rank C and Rank E. Naturally, the Rank C stats would increase faster than the Rank E ones. The distribution of the ranking of each stat was different from person to person. Based on the thirty-two Statuses that he had seen—his own included—Allen had drawn the conclusion that this distribution was quite random.

Eventually, those with high Agility would be assigned to Team One, those with high Endurance would be assigned to Team Two, and those with high Attack would be assigned to Team Three. Rodin and Gerda also agreed that it was a good idea to let the newcomers overcome several Trials of the

Gods first so that it was easier to see what they were good at before "promoting" them to a team.

Around half an hour after the pullers headed off, they came rushing out of the forest at top speed. The fact that they were all together meant they had encountered a great boar that was just by itself.

"THE GREAT BOAR IS COMIIIIIIING!" Pekej yelled.

Oh! Here it comes! Summon: Denka!

While Allen was in the middle of something, everyone else aside from Team One swiftly got into their respective positions. Team Two allowed the three pullers to run through their ranks, then closed their formation. The great boar charged forward, was stopped, then Team Three stepped forward to attack the beast's neck. Everyone's movements were perfect, just as they had been last time.

"Newcomers, come on! And don't stab our backs!"

In response to Gerda's call, the four newcomers all charged forward and thrust with their long spears. Less than five minutes later, the monster's jugular had been punctured and blood jetted from its neck. Several more minutes, and it was on its side, dead.

"I got over it! I overcame another Trial!"

"Me too! So this is what it feels like to overcome a Trial of the Gods!"

Both pairs of newcomers had leveled up. What's more, Allen's grimoire also gave off a soft glow.

<You have defeated 1 great boar. You have earned 400 XP.>
<Your XP has reached 2,000/2,000. You have reached Lvl. 3. Your HP has increased by 25. Your MP has increased by 40. Your Attack has increased by 14. Your Endurance has increased by 14. Your Agility has increased by 26. Your Intelligence has increased by 40. Your Luck has increased by 26.>

IT WORKED! So that counts as being a part of the fight, huh. I even leveled up from it!

While the hunt was going on, Allen had Summoned an Insect H right underneath one of the great boar's hoofs in such a way that it had been promptly stomped to death and reduced to bubbles of light.

After much experimenting, Allen had determined that there were two conditions as to where he could call forth his Summons: the location had to be somewhere within fifty meters of himself, and it had to be at a spot that he had direct line of sight to. There was still quite a lot of freedom with this—for example, he could have a bird Summon appear overhead and immediately fly off. However, he could not Summon anything, say, inside a house while standing outside and looking in through a window. In other words, he had to get the location and timing just perfect so he could Summon Denka exactly where the great boar's foot was going to land.

Hmm, so even when it's just my Summon taking damage, I still get XP from the kill. The pullers don't hold spears, and they basically do nothing

once they've returned to the party, so I assume that being targeted by a monster also counts as being part of a fight?

Allen noted down his observations.

```
Conditions for Gaining XP from a Fight:
Attack
Be attacked
Be targeted
```

Although he ultimately was still barred from participating in the hunt itself, Allen had found a way to make following the hunting party worth his while. He smiled with satisfaction as a sense of achievement filled his chest.

□□□

The year turned, and it was now January 2. Allen and Krena were heading back home from the residential district.

"They gave us so much!"

"They sure did."

Krena looked happy as she trudged along, her hands filled with leftover food.

This world also had a tradition of celebrating the New Year. Allen had been under the impression that it did not, as his own family never did anything special for the occasion. However, while he was catching a break during a play knight session and chatting with Pelomas, he learned that the commoners had such a tradition. The village chief would invite all the commoners over on New Year's and host one big feast. Dogora had also participated every year.

Partly meant as a celebration of the success of last year's great boar hunts, the New Year's celebration this year was even grander than usual. The Long Spear Newcomer Induction Plan devised by Allen had been a resounding success, and the hunting party successfully met their quota of fifteen great boars. In fact, not only did they succeed, they went above and beyond, taking down eighteen great boars without a single person suffering major injury.

The village chief did invite Rodin and Gerda, whom he saw as the key figures behind this achievement, to the New Year's celebration. However, the two of them declined his offer, citing their young children who needed constant care. Thus, participation fell to Allen and Krena instead. Since at least the children of the leaders of the hunting party showed up for the celebration, Deboji was spared public humiliation.

"We're back!" Krena called out right before she reached her house's front door.

Her younger sister, Lily, toddled out and grabbed her older sister, exclaiming "K'ena!" in welcome. The two looked very close. Krena pinched her cheeks gently as Mash also walked out of the house.

"Welcome back," Gerda said. Mathilda was right next to him. Additionally...

"Did you have fun at the village chief's house?"

“Welcome back.”

Rodin, Theresia, and Myulla were also present.

“I’m back, father, mother, Myulla. Mm-hm, I had lots of fun.”

Tonight, both families were spending the night together at Krena’s house. Allen and Krena handed over the meat and fruit they had been carrying. Mathilda and Theresia accepted it all and began preparing for dinner. As these were leftovers from the feast, the food was gourmet compared to the fare that usually graced Allen’s and Krena’s families’ dinner table. Great boar and some of the albaheron Allen caught were also being served.

Soon, the two families’ feast, much humbler than the village chief’s, kicked off. Four adults and six children were a very tight fit in this house, but even so, they all enjoyed themselves immensely.

I really do love sleepovers at Krena’s house.

As everyone ate, Allen regaled them with stories from the feast, such as how Deboji had repeatedly voiced his gratitude toward Rodin and Gerda. Krena, for her part, did not remember much of this, as she had been occupied with eating from start to finish.

Slowly but surely, Gerda started growing listless. Eventually, he asked, “Say, Allen?”

“Yes, Mr. Gerda?”

“The thing behind you…is it what I think it is?”

One of the things that Allen had brought home with him today was a small wooden cask with a capacity of only a few liters. It was currently set down behind where he was sitting. Unlike everything else that he had carried back, he had yet to hand this over.

“Do you mean this barrel? It’s filled with wine, yes.”

Both Rodin and Gerda inadvertently went, “*Ohhhhh*!” in excited voices.

They took the bait. I knew they liked wine.

Ignoring the response from the adults, however, Allen turned to chat with Krena, evoking two bewildered “huh?!”s. The two men could not understand why Allen had just glossed over the topic. They had fully expected the conversation to develop toward them getting the wine.

Allen turned back, his head tilted in seeming puzzlement. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Uh, Deboji gave that to you, right?” Gerda returned, somewhat haltingly.

“Yes, the village chief gave it to me,” Allen responded, the confusion on his face deepening further.

Unable to hold it in any further, Gerda blurted, “*You can’t drink it, though!*” Next to him, Rodin nodded several times to show his support for Gerda’s outburst. Theresia and Mathilda turned toward Allen, their attention drawn by the ruckus the men were raising.

“Awww, okay. It’s my wine, but I guess if you beat me in a contest of strength, I’ll give it to you.”

“Huh?!”

“Contest?!”

“If you don’t want to, I don’t mind. I’ll just keep this to myself.”

Silence filled the room. Krena looked around curiously, still shoveling food into her mouth.

Eventually, Gerda adopted a fierce grin and flexed an arm, showing off his biceps. “All right, you’ve got yourself a contest!”

Noticing Allen’s querying look, Rodin replied, “I can’t very well lose in strength to my own son, can I? Count me in.”

“Okay! A contest of strength it is, then. If I beat both of you, then it’ll be my win. Is that fine?”

Slightly taken by surprise at the terms that seemed so advantageous for himself, Gerda stopped for a brief moment, then nodded. “Someone’s confident. Sure, that works.”

After seeing Rodin nod as well, Allen continued, “So, if I lose, then I’ll give this wine to both of you. What do I get if I win?”

A “huh?” fell from both men’s lips at the same time. They had apparently not even considered the possibility of themselves losing.

“Well, I need motivation too!”

“I mean, is there anything that you want?”

“Mmm… How about, if I win, then I get to join this year’s great boar hunts?”

“HUH?!” three voices cried out at once as Theresia joined in.

Rodin and Gerda had finally realized that they had fallen into a trap. Allen had asked Pelomas ahead of time if wine would be served at the feast. Everything that had happened afterward, including this overnight stay, had been a part of Allen’s plan all along.

“You won’t lose, though, right? This is a contest of *strength*, after all.”

Allen made sure to emphasize the word “strength.” This was not any old contest, but a contest of *strength*. Rodin and Gerda exchanged looks as if asking each other what to do.

Eventually, it was Rodin who responded, understanding that this was his call to make. “Fine, we accept those conditions. If we win, we get the wine. If you win, you get to join this year’s hunts.”

“*Honey*?!” The person most shocked at Rodin’s answer was Theresia. She had not expected him to go along with what she thought was sheer madness.

Rodin calmed his wife down by assuring her that he would not lose, then turned to Allen. “Exactly what do you have in mind for this contest?”

“Arm wrestling.”

All the adults echoed the words, “Arm wrestling…?” in a confused tone as Krena alone went, “Arm wrestling!” in recognition. In order to demonstrate what it was to the adults, Allen had explained it to her at Deboji’s house. In fact, they even had an arm wrestling competition with all the kids present.

“Krena and I will show how it’s done. Krena, can you come over here?”

“Sure!”

Allen and Krena picked their way over to the earthen-floored area, then laid down on the ground, facing each other. There wasn’t enough space to do this in the main room right now, with how packed it was. Everyone else looked on curiously as the two kids gripped each other’s hand.

“Now all we need is someone to tell us when to start. Mother, can you shout, ‘Start!’ for us?”

“Huh? St…art?”

Theresia’s drawn-out word was accepted as the signal, prompting Allen and Krena to start pushing with their arms. Although Krena went red in the face from the exertion, Allen still handily pushed the back of her hand to the ground, claiming victory.

“Allen, you’re so strooong! I lost agaaaain!” Krena cried in frustration. She had also lost just now at Deboji’s house, making this two losses in a row.

“And that’s how it’s done,” Allen said, turning to the adults. “You win by pushing your opponent’s hand to the ground. That’s why it’s a contest of strength.”

The rules were simple, and both Rodin and Gerda caught on quickly. They did look extremely astonished, however, to see Krena, a Sword Lord, lose.

She is still only Lvl. 1, after all. Her Attack isn’t actually all that high.

Krena was strong in a fight because of how high her Sword Mastery skill was. The power that she could muster, however, was unremarkable, as she had yet to kill any monsters.

“All right,” Gerda said. “Who do you want to face first?”

“You, of course, Mr. Gerda. Then father is next.”

Thus began the battle, Allen’s wine and right to hunt on the line.

Gerda descended from the main room to the earthen-floored area. Because of how big his body was, his feet protruded a little out the front door. He and Allen clasped hands.

Now, can I actually win this?

By this point, he had caught so many albaherons that he had reached Lvl. 6, and there was not a single person in the village who did not know of him now. So much for not standing out.

Part of his renown also came from his continued attendance at all the boar hunting party’s hunts the past year. Of course, he did not merely watch while twiddling his thumbs—he provided instruction to commoners and serfs alike, and there was new equipment scheduled to be completed by autumn this year that he had designed.

The way Allen saw it, he had only two options to survive: either go full throttle on leveling, even if this made him stick out, or remain a low-level weakling. In this world, Allen was the only person in Hell Mode. His stats would still remain rock-bottom if he only did as much as the next person.

No, he would have to work a hundred times harder than everyone else for the appraisal values that Elmea had specially added to his grimoire to even become relevant.

After considering everything, Allen had concluded that the first option was the way to go. One major factor behind this decision had been Rodin's injury. It had helped Allen understand that he needed strength to protect those closest to him. He did not mind being a little conspicuous, as long as it did not draw unwanted attention from the nobles or the royal family—he was banking on the results of his appraisal to act as a damper on any waves he created.

Allen wanted to seize the right to participate in the great boar hunts by his own hand. For the sake of this day, he had filled all thirty available card slots with Beast F cards. Gerda was somewhat hesitant, but when he saw the resolution in the eyes staring back at him, a serious expression came over his face. Both sides meant business in this contest.

"This all right?" Gerda asked, getting down beside Allen and digging his elbow into the ground.

Allen nodded. "Krena, be our referee."

"Okay!" Krena placed her hand where Allen's and Gerda's were clasped. She had also learned the "proper" way of refereeing at the village chief's house just now. "Ready…start!"

Both sides grunted "HMPH!" and started pushing with all their might. The muscles on Gerda's arm seemed at risk of bursting as both contestants' faces grew redder and redder.

Shock filled Gerda's face. Rodin simply watched on. Theresia and Mathilda both exclaimed in surprise. The strength that Allen was displaying was far beyond that of a normal seven-year-old. And slowly but surely, he started gaining the upper hand. Before long, Gerda's hand hit the ground. Allen had won.

"NOOOOO!!! I LOOOSTTT!!!" Gerda howled in frustration. The two women's faces made it clear they could not believe what they had just witnessed.

Oof, that was really close. Based on this, I'd say Gerda's Attack stat is between 150 to 200.

Allen flapped his hand about, trying to shake away fatigue in preparation for the next round. Rodin studied him with a severe look on his face, then got up and took off his pale brown jacket, exposing the well-developed muscles that he had gained from swinging his hoe day after day, morning to evening. He was going to go all out.

"I'll wait for your arm to recover," Rodin said, indicating that he wanted to face Allen in top condition.

"Th-Thank you, father."

Several minutes later, Allen had rested enough and was good to go again. He was ready for what would be his fourth match of the day. He and

his father both lay down on the bare earth facing each other, dug their elbows into the ground, and clasped hands.

I feel like this is the first time we've held hands so firmly before.

Rodin's hand was rugged and calloused, conveying just how hard he had been working for his family's sake. Allen's heart overflowed with appreciation. At the same time, Rodin also looked as though he wanted to say something. It had been years since he had held his son's hand properly. However, Krena, who saw that the two of them were settled, came forward to place her own hand over theirs.

Allen shot a quick look at his mother and found her earnestly praying for his father's victory. It was only natural, of course, as Rodin losing meant Allen taking up a spear and fighting in person this autumn. Clearly, Theresia had zero intention of cheering for Allen in this contest.

"Okay, ready? Start!"

Right after the signal, both father and son let out a "HMPH!" and pushed with all they had. Rodin's face turned red and the veins on his arm bulged.

Shit, he's this strong? Uh-oh...

Thanks to the +150 boost from his thirty Beast F cards, the total value of Allen's Attack could now be rounded up to 200, but Rodin's was apparently much higher than that. Little by little, Allen lost ground, and soon enough, he was thoroughly beaten. He did not even have a chance to make the slightest comeback.

Three voices cheered in unison—two in elation and one in relief. Rodin had defeated Allen, who had beaten both Sword Lord Krena and Gerda. The man pumped his fist in a rare show of childish excitement and basked in the glow of his victory. He was extremely happy about winning, to put it mildly.

Damn, I didn't stand a chance. His Attack is probably somewhere between 250 and 300, isn't it?

Allen mentally estimated Rodin's stats using his own as a benchmark while graciously passing the wine cask over.

"WHOO! WINE!"

"HELL YEAH!"

Rodin and Gerda helped themselves with zero hesitation. They filled each other's wooden cups to the brim. Rodin exclaimed about how delicious his drink of victory was.

When they went through the Appraisal Ceremony, father's Attack probably showed up as "C" and Gerda's as "D," I'd venture to guess.

Of course, Allen had had every intention of winning. However, there was something else that he wanted to confirm—specifically, just how strong someone in Normal Mode was. The more monsters someone killed, the higher their level would be. Now, exactly how strong does someone who leveled up under Normal Mode become? And thanks to the arm wrestling session just now, Allen had learned that even someone without a Talent would easily raise their Attack above two hundred.

“Gosh, you’re being immature!” Mathilda scolded, seeing how blatantly Rodin and Gerda were celebrating.

“Your father’s just too strong, Allen,” Theresia said in a comforting tone. She had apparently taken his silence as a sign of him feeling dejected, even though he was actually just occupied with analyzing what had just happened. Still, although she was trying to console Allen, she seemed happy with the result.

“That’s right, Allen! I’m strong! And if you can’t beat me, then I can’t let you take part in the hunts!”

In other words, Rodin was telling Allen that he needed to beat Rodin first if he wanted permission to participate. His cheeks were flushed, indicating that he was already slightly intoxicated.

Yes, he said it! I’ll hold him to it. If I manage to raise Summoning to Lvl. 4 by autumn, I might still have a chance! Father, I won’t let you say you don’t remember all this because you were drunk.

“Okay. I won’t ask to participate in the great boar hunts anymore, not until I can beat you, father,” Allen conceded, making a face and adopting a tone that made it seem like he was giving up.

This face-off between father and son had ended with Rodin’s victory.

Chapter 11: Rank E Summons

Hell yeah! Summoning finally leveled up again!

Spring had given way to summer, and it was now June. Allen basked in a feeling of achievement as he continued washing his family's laundry in a large tub by stomping on it. Golden lines were glowing at the bottom of the log on the front cover of his grimoire.

<The Skill XP of Strengthening has reached 100,000/100,000. Strengthening has reached Lvl. 4. Summoning has reached Lvl. 4. Expansion has reached Lvl. 3. You have obtained Storage.>

There's so much information again. But before anything else, let's look at my Status! I can't wait to see what's changed!

Name: Allen
Age: 7
Class: Summoner
Level: 6
HP: 115 (165) + 50
MP: 154 (220) + 100
Attack: 56 (80) + 50
Endurance: 56 (80)
Agility: 108 (155)
Intelligence: 161 (230)
Luck: 108 (155) + 100
Skills: Summoning {4}, Creation {4}, Synthesis {4}, Strengthening {4}, Expansion {3}, Storage, Deletion, Sword Mastery {3}, Throwing {3}
XP: 0/6,000
Skill LevelsSummoning: 4
Creation: 4
Synthesis: 4
Strengthening: 4
Skill ExperienceCreation: 256/1,000,000
Synthesis: 120/1,000,000
Strengthening: 0/1,000,000
Creatable SummonsInsect: E, F, G, H
Beast: E, F, G, H
Bird: E, F, G
Grass: E, F
???: E
HolderInsect:
Beast: F x 10
Bird:

Grass: F x 20
???:

Storage looks like a new skill. Hold on, it doesn't have levels? It's not listed under Skill Experience either. Does that mean it can't be developed?

The first thing that caught Allen's eye was his brand-new skill. He continued his analysis as he moved onto hanging up the laundry in the yard.

All right, I can check out what Storage does afterward. What's next? Oh! I really did get access to Rank E Summons from Summoning leveling up! There's a new "???" which I'll probably have to figure out the combination for again.

Allen now had a lot more MP than when he first gained access to Rank F Summons. He expected the experimental process to go a lot faster this time.

Gosh, how long has it been since Summoning last leveled up? Whoa, a year and ten months?! That's Hell Mode for you. And the higher the level, the more it's gonna take.

Next, Allen checked the pages in his grimoire with card holders.

Nice, now I can store a total of forty cards!

The more cards he held, the more buffs he would receive. And now the number that he could keep on hand had just jumped up from thirty to forty. Rank H cards provided +1 buffs, Rank G provided +2, and Rank F provided +5. Extrapolating off of this, it seemed reasonable to expect Rank E cards to provide even stronger buffs. Allen could foresee these higher ranked Summons and the ten new card slots boosting his Status quite significantly.

Whoo! Would I be able to beat father in arm wrestling now? I'm so glad this level up came before great boar hunting season starts. I gotta find a good time to challenge him again. Would it make for a fun surprise to do it the day before the first hunt of the year?

Allen could not help but do a little jig as he carried another armful of laundry over to the clotheslines for drying.

All right, I think all there's left to do is figure out Storage and analyze the Rank E Summons. Which should I start with? Well, my MP's all empty, as it always is after leveling up a skill, so that leaves me with the former.

By this time, Allen had finished hanging up all the laundry, which meant his hands were now free.

Store!

Because he had no idea how to use the new skill, Allen tried chanting internally for it. His grimoire was quite closely linked with his thoughts, so in most cases, he could just mentally will something and the book would respond. And sure enough, the grimoire flipped open, this time to a page that had not been accessible before.

Hm? It's got a...hole? The heck's this for?

Smack dab in the middle of the page was a hole thirty centimeters tall and wide. Strangely, it was clearly deeper than the thickness of the book itself. In fact, the bottom was not even visible.

Do I…put things in here?

Allen thought a bit about what to put inside before eventually going with a random twig from the ground. For all he knew, this could be a hyperdimensional pocket that would swallow everything it came into contact with. He slowly and gingerly brought the twig close to the grimoire…and saw its tip going inside with no resistance whatsoever.

Interesting. And if I pull it back out… Yep, there's the whole twig.

Next, Allen dropped one of his throwing stones into the hole. It disappeared completely from sight.

I'm a bit scared, but let's try putting my hand inside… Whoa, a list of what's inside the hole appears directly in my mind!

After this, Allen proceeded to conduct various tests with the Storage page. As always, he then summed up his findings.

```
10 x Stone
1 x Tree more than a meter tall (Grass F Aroma tree)
20 days of firewood (300 kg)
Water
```

Does this thing actually have infinite capacity?

The observations that Allen made blew his mind, to put it mildly. As it turned out, he was able to store whatever and however much of it he wanted, as long as it could fit within a thirty-by-thirty-centimeter opening. Throughout all his testing, he never found himself out of capacity and not once did what he put inside disappear to make room.

He was in the middle of putting back all the firewood that he had borrowed, still deep in his thoughts, when Theresia called out from inside the house, "Alleeen, it's time for lunch!"

"Yes, mother!" Oh wow, it's already lunchtime. I didn't notice the time flying. Okay, but seriously, why am I getting this ability now? I must be missing something.

Allen's findings had left him feeling a vague sense of something being off. Back when he was a gamer, he had learned about carrying capacity and what a large factor it was in the playing experience of a game.

For example, some games had a fixed number of inventory slots, allowing the player to carry only, say, ten or twenty items before having to unload them at a bank or storage facility in order to carry things again. Other games assigned each item a weight and only allowed players to carry items that added up to a certain combined weight value, adjusting this based on player class or level. Conversely, there were also games that simply gave players completely unrestricted inventory from the very start of the game.

What was bothering Allen, in light of all the above scenarios, was that he was receiving this almost god-tier Storage function at such an awkward

time. If he had received it back when he turned one year old and first came into his own as a Summoner, then he would have been able to simply accept it. On the other hand, if he never received it at all, he would understand that too. Yet, he had received it when his Summoning reached Lvl. 4, a number that did not carry any immediately understandable significance.

Because Allen had fallen back into his thoughts again, Theresia called him once more. He hurriedly headed inside to help her with preparing the meal. While his hands moved, his mind resumed its speculations.

In games, players received important items right before they needed them. These were all things that, without them, the player would be unable to progress in the game, with some examples being keys, flying carpets, and boats. Games gave out what was needed when it was needed. That was how game developers influenced players to play the way they wanted.

There's got to be a reason for this. A reason why the Storage function is relevant to me now.

There was no doubt of this in Allen's mind. After all, the person who gave him this skill was the God of Creation of this world.

□□□

The next day, Allen was once again analyzing his skills while doing the laundry. He was staring at his grimoire, which floated next to him, as he continued stomping away inside the large barrel.

All right, my MP is full. Time to take a look at these Rank E Summons. Insect and Beast are the only two kinds I can Create outright. Might as well start with Insect. Create: Insect E!

Allen attempted to Create a Rank E card the same way he had been Creating all the other cards to date. However, nothing happened. Normally, this was the point where a card would appear before him in a flash of light.

What? Why? Do I not have enough MP? My MP is 233 now, though!

The memory from several years ago of when he did not have sufficient MP to use Creation Lvl. 2 resurfaced in Allen's mind. However, he was sure he had more than enough MP now. He looked over at the log on his grimoire, sure that the issue this time lay somewhere else.

Sure enough, the explanation was written out clearly in silver text.

<You do not have enough Rank E magic stones to Create an Insect E card.>

"What?!" Allen unconsciously exclaimed out loud. He was so surprised he almost fell out of the bucket. *Magic stones?! I need magic stones to Create all the Summons that are Rank E and above?!*

Allen remembered the Rank E magic stones stored in the nursery. He quickly slipped inside the house, being careful not to wake Myulla up from her afternoon nap, and pried up the floorboard to reveal the space where the family kept their valuables. Sure enough, right next to a bag full of silver coins—containing 342 silver that he had earned selling the meat from all the albaherons he caught last year—there were several magic stones. Around the size of the tip of his pinky, these had come from horned rabbits.

Just like most other magic stones, these looked almost entirely spherical. As an aside, albaheron magic stones were about the size of the first joint of Allen's thumb, and great boar magic stones were about as big as a ping-pong ball.

Allen returned outside and resumed stomping on the laundry. With the magic stones in his grip, he attempted to activate Creation once again.

Please let it work this time. Create: Insect E!

Again, nothing happened. Allen checked his grimoire in slight exasperation and found the same line about not having enough magic stones.

I have magic sto— Wait, are you telling me...?!

In a flash of insight, Allen opened his grimoire up to the Storage page and threw all his magic stones inside.

This should do it. Third time's the charm. Create: Insect E!

This time, a card bearing an illustration of an insect finally appeared before his eyes.

Yes! That did the trick! I see, so this is what Storage is for. So, my Rank E Summon is a butterfly.

Allen saw no need to put it off, so he decided to try Summoning it immediately. The card disappeared in a flash of light, and Insect E appeared.

"Wait, what?! You're way too bi— Return!"

The instant he laid eyes on the gigantic butterfly measuring over a meter tall, Allen immediately Unsummoned it in a fluster. He could tell that it looked like a swallowtail butterfly from the quick glimpse he caught, but that was it.

Damn, so Rank E Summons can be that big? That's a problem. So, I can't casually call them out and analyze them in our front yard anymore, what with there always being someone home. Does this mean the higher the rank, the bigger the Summons will get?

With no other choice, Allen decided to leave Insect E alone for now and Create a Beast E card.

Whoa, this is a saber-toothed tiger! We jumped straight from dog to saber-toothed tiger? Talk about a power-up! All right, now that I have an Insect card and a Beast card, I guess it's time to move onto Synthesizing. Let's see what we get.

Allen opened up the Synthesis page in his grimoire and found it different from how he remembered it. Previously, the left page of the spread had two impressions for him to put in the cards he was Synthesizing together and the right page had a single impression where the Synthesized card would appear. Now, however, the left page had three impressions. The two at the top were perfect fits for Summoning cards, but the size of the one at the bottom made it clear it was for something else.

Uh-oh, are you telling me that Synthesis needs magic stones too? I already used two of them just now.

A sense of foreboding filled Allen's heart. However, he still placed the Insect E and Beast E cards into the impressions on the left page and mentally willed the grimoire to Synthesize a Bird E card. The rank was different, but the general process should still have been the same.

However, nothing happened. So he placed a magic stone into the third impression.

Synthesize!

This time, a new card did indeed appear.

All right, that confirms it: I really do need a magic stone each time I Synthesize. Ugh, this sucks. I'm going to need a lot of magic stones, then.

It was now clear that both Creation and Synthesis required magic stones. Bird cards only required one round of Synthesis, but Grass cards required two rounds.

"Alleeen, it's almost time for lunch!"

"Yes, mother!"

Allen had been so engrossed with his analyzing that he had failed to notice how much time had passed. When he stepped back into his house, he found Theresia waiting in the earthen-floored area. Mash and Myulla were hanging out in the main room further in. The moment Myulla caught sight of Allen, she started babbling happily. She had brown hair and green eyes and, at a year and three months old, had become capable of crawling all around inside the house.

Back when Allen had turned one, Theresia had returned to the fields to help Rodin out during the times of the day when Allen was asleep. Now that Myulla was the same age, Theresia had planned on doing the same thing, but Allen had stopped her, saying that he would do the field work instead.

Nowadays, Allen also helped Theresia out with making lunch. The family's fare was light, but five portions together was still a good deal of food.

Soon enough, Rodin returned home, loudly declaring, "I'm back!" Allen had been out in the fields with him until around 10 a.m., when he had come back first to do the laundry.

The scene around the dinner table was the same as always. As he dug into his potato, Rodin suddenly said, "With how big our family's gotten, I'm thinking it might be time to expand our house. You'd want a room of your own, right, Allen?"

Allen looked up in surprise. "Huh? Uh…not really? I'm fine with how things are. We don't even have money for expansions, father."

"What are you saying? We have a pretty tidy sum now thanks to you. It's more than enough to cover the materials we'd need."

What?! I'm gathering it to buy our freedom! Please don't use it for something like this!

Allen had earned a total of 342 silver coins last year by selling the meat from all the albaherons he caught. Of course, he had then given all the

money to his father. All possessions belonged to Rodin, as he was the family head.

A total of five thousand silver coins would be needed to lift five people from serfdom. That goal was still very far off, and there was no leeway for any splurging. However, Allen had yet to tell his family this goal of his.

“We really should save it for now. Just in case something happens and we really need money, like someone getting badly hurt again or Myulla getting sick. I really don’t mind sleeping in the nursery with Mash and Myulla.”

“Are you sure?”

Apparently, Rodin was not going to press the issue. He probably thought Allen might change his mind once he grew a bit older.

“Speaking of expansions, father, I heard that the village moat is done?”

“The moat? Oh, yeah, it’s done. You helped out too, didn’t you?”

I knew it. Gah, that’s a problem.

This village was encircled by a wall made of wooden logs. However, there were gaps in between, and every once in a while, weak monsters like horned rabbits would slip through. Although they were of the lowest rank, they could still pose a threat to young children. In order to prevent the monsters from entering, the villagers—more specifically, the serfs—had started digging a moat outside the wall starting a few years back. They only could work on it between January and March during the few months with no farm work. This year even Allen and Rodin had chipped in. And now, the moat was complete. In other words, the horned rabbits with their Rank E magic stones would no longer be wandering into the village.

Would Krena’s place happen to have magic stones?

Allen racked his brains for alternate ways to gather magic stones.

□ □ □

“Seriously?” Allen muttered to himself from the middle of his family’s fallow field. After trying for three whole days, he had just discovered his final Rank E Summon. Part of what had made the process take so long was running around gathering all the magic stones he could.

Magic stones could only be found inside the bodies of monsters. According to Pelomas, it was usually close to their hearts. Unlike Allen, he was well-read and was knowledgeable in a wide variety of subjects. According to him, magic stones were often used as a power source for magic tools. An example of a magic tool would be the street lights in the feudal lord’s city.

However, there were no magic tools in this village, which meant there was absolutely zero demand for magic stones. Rank D and Rank C magic stones would be delivered to the feudal lord’s town, of course, but Rank E magic stones were basically treated as trash. It was valued below even one copper coin. Because of this, when the villagers caught horned rabbits, some would simply throw the magic stones out. Gerda belonged to this

group—he would haphazardly throw his Rank E magic stones into his front yard. Allen had been able to spot a few and pick them up.

As it turned out, the magic stones in the front yard of Allen's and Krena's houses were still insufficient for Allen to Create and Synthesize all the Rank E Summons. It was only after he asked around at the well while drawing in the morning that he finally gathered the number he needed. Because the perceived value of the magic stones was so low, those who had helped Allen out with butchering albaherons last year very readily agreed to share.

Allen had now come to hide in his family's fallow plot because there was something that he absolutely had to confirm. The problem was that the Summon currently before him towered above the verdant grass all around and was entirely visible to anyone who might cast a glance in his direction. However, his mind was so overwhelmed at the moment that this fact did not occur to him.

"So this…*this* was the developers' intention," he murmured, touching his Summon.

Game elements are carefully and particularly crafted for specific purposes. For example, the developers might want players to use certain builds for respective classes or want them to adopt specific roles in party battles; the way they designed the game would hint at this. The Swordsman class might be given higher Attack and Endurance, making it more viable for fighting up close and drawing the monsters' attention.

There were those who would intentionally go against these suggestions and play directly opposite to how the developers intended. This was called "memebuilding." A player could select the Mage class but rely on a mace to deal physical damage. When comparing normal and meme builds it was blatantly obvious which was more viable. Following along with the developer's intent was crucial to performing well in any game.

If this was a normal game, then it would have walkthrough sites and online forums. However, this was a proper flesh-and-blood world, not a game. Allen had to figure everything out on his own.

For the past seven years, the same question had continued to rattle around in his brain: What is a Summoner? It was his class, but how was he supposed to play it? What was his fighting style supposed to be? What should he do to better align himself with the intentions of the gods and make the most of his class?

It had been clear pretty early on that simply calling forth Summons and making them fight on his behalf was not everything there was to it—the Rank F and H Summons' Abilities were just too varied. So, what *was* it then? However, now that he had seen what his Rank E Summons could do, Allen believed he may have begun to see a faint outline of the gods' designs. He was getting closer to the truth. And the truth shocked him.

The following were the details of the Rank E Summons:

[redacted]

Status of Insect E (Butterfly) Type: Insect
Rank: E
Name: Ageha
HP: 25
MP: 0
Attack: 20
Endurance: 50
Agility: 50
Intelligence: 24
Luck: 28
Buffs: Endurance 10, Agility 10
Ability: Scale Powder

Status of Beast E (Saber-toothed Tiger) Type: Beast
Rank: E
Name: Tama
HP: 50
MP: 0
Attack: 50
Endurance: 20
Agility: 35
Intelligence: 28
Luck: 21
Buffs: HP 10, Attack 10
Ability: Claw

Status of Bird E (Hawk) Type: Bird
Rank: E
Name: Hawkins
HP: 23
MP: 0
Attack: 22
Endurance: 24
Agility: 50
Intelligence: 50
Luck: 27
Buffs: Agility 10, Intelligence 10
Ability: Hawk Eye

Status of Grass E (Edamame) Type: Grass
Rank: E
Name: Mametaro
HP: 21
MP: 50

Attack: 20
Endurance: 22
Agility: 20
Intelligence: 13
Luck: 50
Buffs: MP 10, Luck 10
Ability: Leaf of Life

Status of Stone E (Dirt Wall) Type: Stone
Rank: E
Name: Wally
HP: 50
MP: 20
Attack: 33
Endurance: 50
Agility: 20
Intelligence: 23
Luck: 28
Buffs: HP 10, Endurance 10
Ability: Harden

Allen was so startled that his mind went blank for a short while. When he returned to his senses, he quickly reverted Stone E to card form. Then he took a closer look at the page on his grimoire where the Statuses of all his new Summons were listed out.

If I'm reading this right…there is a specific role that's being assigned to each type of Summon, right?

Without ado, Allen applied himself to sorting through his observations and writing them all down.

Insect Type (Abilities: Provoke, Suction, Scale Powder)
Provoke robs enemies of their ability to think straight, and Suction lowers enemies' Attack. Based on this, it seems likely that the Insect type is specialized for casting debuffs. Judging by its name, Scale Powder probably inflicts a status debuff on enemies like confusion, paralysis, or sleep.

Beast Type (Abilities: Dig, Chomp, Claw)
Possessing high HP and Attack, this is the only type properly specced for attacking. This type will be the main source of damage when fighting against monsters. Will probably only ever be using the highest-ranked Summon from this type.

Bird Type (Abilities: Voice Mimic, Transmission, Hawk Eye)
Voice Mimic is capable of mimicking other people's voices and using them to say anything. Should be useful when infiltrating enemy camps. Transmission makes it possible to convey

information to someone faraway. Hawk Eye is likely for scouting. Based on all this, the Bird type seems specialized for intelligence and information gathering.
Grass Type (Abilities: Aroma, Leaf of Life)
This type is specialized for recovery. Leaf of Life is, based on the name, likely something that helps restore HP. It seems likely future additions to this type will be offering recovery in other areas.
Stone Type (Abilities: Harden)
The Stone E Summon seems perfect for ducking behind in order to evade incoming attacks. This is likely a type specialized for defense and tanking.

Although Allen had not yet started experimenting with the Rank E Summons, there was a lot that he could glean from just the names of their Abilities. It was becoming clear how each type of Summon had its own role. This was further substantiated by how the Summons had the two stats most relevant to their respective roles bumped up higher than all the rest.

So, a Summoner is someone who is able to handle all roles in a fight, be it attacking, defending, debuffing, healing, and scouting. I imagine later additions will continue expanding the range of what I can do.

In other words, the single class of Summoner was equipped to fulfill the roles of multiple classes. Just to list a few, it had means to attack like a Swordsman, heal like a Cleric, and scout like a Thief. Unlocking other kinds of Summons would probably enable Allen to do even more things in the future that he currently could not.

Allen took this to be the intention of the developers, or the gods, behind the Summoner class. He opened up his grimoire and turned to stare at the Storage page. It was connected to a hyperdimensional pocket that was, in all likelihood, completely infinite in volume and could store anything and everything that fit through its thirty-by-thirty-centimeter entrance.

I am going to need so many magic stones going forward.

Allen had also written down in his notes how many magic stones he would need for each type of Summon.
Insect: 1
Beast: 1
Bird: 3
Grass: 5
Stone: 9

According to this pattern, the types that show up later on down the road would require even greater numbers of magic stones. Even now, if Allen intended on filling all forty slots in his holder with Stone E, he would need a total of 360 magic stones.

So, the reason why I was given the Storage skill was so I wouldn’t have to walk around constantly lugging tens to hundreds of magic stones all the time. After all, the physical size of the magic stones also goes up with rank.

As Allen continued mulling over his epiphany, a scene unfolded within his mind. He saw himself in his ultimate form as a Summoner. Surrounding him was an endless horde of Summons, an invincible army capable of dealing with any situation and triumphing over all who stood in its way. The Summons would take care of everything. All enemies would be ground to dust before the might of this legendary host.

"An invincible army, huh. So this is the power of a Summoner, the class that surpasses even Demon Lord."

Allen was so overwhelmed he ended up blurting his thoughts out loud. Now, he was even more motivated to take his class as far as it could go. Allen...had just had a glimpse of the gods' will.

□ □ □

It was now mid-September. Soon, summer would be giving way to autumn.

"You ready to go?"

"Yes, father."

Today, Rodin and Allen were heading out first thing in the morning. Yesterday, Deboji had sent a messenger. To Rodin's surprise, the village chief wanted to see both him and Allen this time. The reason for the summons was not provided.

As always, Theresia, Mash, and Myulla were staying home. They saw Rodin and Allen off at the front door.

"Yo, Rodin. I knew it—you got called too."

Along the way, the father and son bumped into Gerda, who fell into step with them.

Well, it's not surprising. Father and Gerda are the two who usually get summoned by the village chief—in fact, I'm the odd one out here.

It was not uncommon for the village chief to call for Rodin and Gerda, as they were the de facto leaders of the serfs in the village. The great boar hunts were not the only reason Deboji would summon them—he would also ask them to take care of a large variety of minor miscellaneous affairs, such as mediating disputes between serfs. That said, it was mostly Rodin who took care of such intervention requests, as Gerda would resort to using his fists too quickly.

"Did you hear what he wants us for this time, Gerda?"

"Nah, I was only told to come."

I mean, if it's all three of us, then it's very likely going to be about the great boar hunts. Does Deboji have something to say now, with the hunts starting up next month? He already told us to hunt fifteen last year and twenty this year. Has something changed?

During the past three months, Allen had done everything he could to gather magic stones. He called out to the other serfs while drawing water, got on his hands and knees in Krena's garden to poke between the weeds, reached out to Dogora and Pelomas, and even hit up every store in the commercial area to ask if they had magic stones they did not need. Thanks

to his backbreaking efforts, he ultimately managed to obtain more than two hundred stones.

Now there were quite a lot of Grass E cards in his storage. The reason he chose to go with Grass E was for the MP boost it provided. The more MP he had, the faster he could reach Summoning Lvl. 5, which would require a total of 3,000,000 Skill XP.

He was currently debating internally whether to join the great boar hunts next month. If he was to focus on accruing XP, then he should go. However, if he was to focus on earning money to free his family from serfdom, then staying home to hunt albaherons was the smarter choice by far. In short, he was now torn on what he should be prioritizing: XP or money. Because of this, he had yet to challenge Rodin again in arm wrestling. And in fact, he expected the outcome of today's talk to be a factor in helping him make a decision.

Allen remained absorbed in his thoughts the entire way as the group of three made their way to the village chief's house. When they stepped inside, they found themselves immediately escorted to Deboji's room, where he welcomed them with outstretched arms.

"There you guys are. I've been waiting."

"So, why'd you summon us? And why'd you want Allen too?"

Oh wow, father's starting with the big question. I like it. Seriously, do I even need to be here? Is it that the equipment I requested is complete and he wants me to explain how they're meant to be used?

"Now, now, there's no hurry," Deboji replied before gesturing for his servants to lay tea and snacks on the table.

What?! These are actual confectionaries! It's my first time seeing any in this world. And they're... Oh my god, they're so goooood!

The cookies, made from wheat and sugar, disappeared into Allen's mouth at an alarming rate. He had a huge sweet tooth.

In contrast, Rodin and Gerda simply frowned, showing no intention of reaching toward the plate. Deboji had never served them tea before when they visited, much less snacks.

"So? What'd you call us for?" Rodin asked again, his voice even more colored with wariness than before.

After taking another sip of tea and sighing softly, Deboji said, "The feudal lord is coming to Krena Village next month." Ignoring the confounded "What?!" from all three members of his audience, he then continued, "And he wants to see a great boar hunting session in person. Even I learned of this only yesterday. A messenger just arrived."

"You mean, we have to bring down a great boar while His Lordship is watching?" Gerda asked in a tone of disbelief.

Without missing a beat, Deboji replied, "That's exactly right."

Both Rodin and Gerda looked completely taken back. Allen would be turning eight next month, but not once had he ever heard talk of the feudal

lord coming to their village. In fact, this might be the very first time since the village's founding thirteen years ago.

What's this? Talk about a sudden development, Allen thought before asking out loud, "Around when in October would he be coming?"

"I was told the middle of the month," Deboji answered before murmuring softly, "I knew it."

Allen noticed the strange reaction, but before he could say anything, Rodin asked, "And? What do you want us to do?"

"Just make sure the hunt goes off without a hitch. His Lordship will be watching, after all."

"We always do our best to make the hunts go off without a hitch. Okay, so the feudal lord is coming. How does that involve my boy?"

"The messenger also said that someone would be needed to accompany His Lordship and serve as his guide."

"*What?!*" both Rodin and Gerda exclaimed in unison when they saw Deboji turn to face Allen.

Allen pointed at himself. "Uh…me?"

"Mr. Deboji, if it has to be a kid, you've got one of your own too!"

"My son is a bit of a late bloomer, I guess you could say. Or more like, he's not very suited for this kind of thing. Allen would have to serve His Lordship at the dinner feast the night before the hunt as well. Do you think he'd be up to it?"

Ah, so it's not just explaining what's happening during the hunt. Wait, is that why Deboji laid out snacks? Hmph, I'm not cheap enough to be bought off with something like this!

In spite of his thoughts, Allen threw another piece of cookie into his mouth.

Rodin groaned loudly as he thought hard about it. Of course, the right to answer did not lie with Allen, but with his father. After all, this was the feudal lord they were talking about. If Allen messed anything up in the presence of the feudal lord, it was Rodin who would have to take responsibility.

"I heard that it was Allen who devised both the new equipment and your current hunting method," Deboji pointed out, pressing his point. "He speaks clearly and has a sharp mind. He's perfect for the role."

Allen stared at Rodin as his own thoughts rattled around inside his head. He had no interest whatsoever in status—beyond that of his family living free and comfortably, that was. Back when he was Kenichi and creating his character for this world, he had seen that the Summoner class was restricted to being born as a serf, and this had not made him hesitate in the slightest.

Even now, he felt no desire at all to climb his way up into nobility after obtaining commoner citizenship. Rather, he would do everything in his power to avoid any situation that could potentially saddle him with a noble status, as he could only imagine it being a shackle that would prevent him

from dedicating himself to leveling up. Serving the country was absolutely out of the question.

That said, being a serf came with rather severe limitations.

As long as I'm a serf, I wouldn't be able to go outside the village. That means I can't level up freely.

The only time in the year when Allen could earn levels was during the brief window in autumn when he could hunt both great boars and albaherons. His Rank E Summons remained largely unanalyzed, and there was much about even his Rank F Summons that he had not been able to explore yet. He very desperately wanted to do something to improve his current situation.

At the same time, he also felt driven to raise his family's living conditions.

If I remember right, there are two ways of escaping being a serf, right? According to what Gerda said, the first is to buy your way out, with the price being ten gold coins per person, and the second is for the feudal lord to grant you commoner status as a reward for some contribution or achievement.

Last autumn, Allen had done everything he could to earn money, and yet he had only gathered a little over three gold coins. At this rate, it would take him over ten years to free his entire family. There was no telling what could happen to them within such a long period of time, especially with how little freedom of movement they had and how low their social status was.

I'd been trying to decide between joining the boar hunts and staying home to hunt albaherons, but now the answer is as clear as day.

"Father."

"Hm? What's the matter, Allen?"

"Please let me be the feudal lord's guide."

"What?!"

"I've got to tell him how hard you and everyone else in the hunting party are working!" Allen beamed brightly. If I can convince the feudal lord of the enormity of what father's done so far, he just might make him a commoner.

Deboji's face lit up. "Ohhh! You're interested, boy?!"

Rodin looked surprised but did not express his opposition. Neither did Gerda. By now, they both had faith that Allen actually could accomplish what he said he could do.

"So, what're we gonna do now?" Gerda asked, moving the conversation along.

"Mr. Deboji, is the equipment I asked for done yet?"

"Mm-hm, they're in my warehouse. You want to see them now?"

"Yes, please. I want to go over how they're meant to be used and how it would affect the way the hunts go."

Allen had decided to dedicate himself to the great boar hunts. With the feudal lord coming soon next month, it was time to kick things up a notch.

Chapter 12: The Feudal Lord’s Visit

It was now mid-October. Allen had turned eight.

The feudal lord would be arriving that day. Allen would have to serve him during the feast that evening, as well as accompany him the following day so as to explain everything happening during the great boar hunt. If the lord had any questions, it would be Allen’s job to answer them.

And so Allen got up bright and early and, after grooming himself, headed for the village chief’s house. Neither Rodin nor Gerda was with him, as he was the only one granted permission to see the feudal lord.

Allen arrived before 9 a.m., then went into sleep mode—literally, in his case. A little before noon, a commoner working at the house woke him up and told him to take a bath to wash himself up.

A bath! I think this will be my first proper bath in this world. The most I’ve done is take a dip in a pool of well water.

A few times by this point, especially on the hottest days in summer, Allen had drawn a large tub of water and gotten in naked. Because he was a serf, he had no access to soap, and had just wiped himself down with a hemp cloth.

Now, Allen sighed with satisfaction as he lowered himself into the heated water. He soaked inside for a bit, then scrubbed his body thoroughly before the water cooled off.

After his bath, Allen received a fresh set of clothes. The outfit was made of material noticeably nicer than what even commoners normally wore.

Then Allen was made to wait another three hours. This time he was to stay awake and on standby, just in case.

C’mon, what’s the point of making me wait around for this long?

Nearly an hour had passed since Allen heard the 3 p.m. bell ring. Only then did the feudal lord’s procession finally arrive at the village, sending everyone inside the house into a frenzy of activity. By the time the feudal lord reached the house, he and his party found a feast waiting for them to enjoy by themselves. Deboji, as the representative of the village, was the only person to join them at the table.

Allen had questioned Deboji about the feudal lord beforehand. The lord lived in Granvelle City, the capital of this fiefdom, which was a five days’ journey from the village. The current head of House Granvelle, Baron Granvelle, was who Allen would be serving. As he had been on the road for the past five days, he was sure to be quite spent.

While Allen was busy mentally reviewing everything he had learned, before he knew it, it became time for him to make his appearance. The spacious kitchen in the village chief’s house was currently a war zone, with five or six women all rushing about, cooking their own dishes simultaneously. They then artfully plated the dishes one after the other in quick succession.

Deboji stood before the door leading into the dining hall, looking quite nervous. The feudal lord was already seated and waiting inside. Deboji told Allen to follow him closely, took a deep breath, then walked in and gave his greetings.

"Please allow me to extend my warmest welcome on behalf of Krena Village," Deboji said to the lord's party before continuing in a voice loud enough to be heard through the door, "Bring in the food."

Allen began bringing the dishes over to the lone table within the large hall.

The person all the way in the back should be the feudal lord.

The man sitting in the seat furthest from the door—in other words, the seat of honor—had pale purple hair and eyes that looked as sharp as a hawk's. His features, which gave him the appearance of a man in his mid-forties, conveyed his no-nonsense personality.

Allen wordlessly carried the dish to the feudal lord's seat, doing his utmost not to stare. After the lord, he then served everyone else. The kitchen staff had placed all their finished plates on a table near the dining hall entrance, sparing Allen the trouble of returning all the way to the kitchen. As such, he only had to go back and forth between the entrance and the dining table. For some reason, only he had been entrusted with the full service during the meal, while the other servants remained entirely hands-off.

So, I have to bring the feudal lord his plate first, then to the five others here, including Deboji. Hm? There's a child at the table. Is she the baron's daughter?

Allen carried the food over to each person in turn. First the feudal lord, then the butler-like man with white hair and a mustache next to him, then the knight captain and vice-captain whom he recognized from when they visited the village to meet Krena. Sitting on the other side of the feudal lord was a young girl who also had pale purple hair. She appeared to be around Allen's age.

The girl also seemed curious about seeing a boy her own age in attendance. She kept shooting glances at Allen.

“Deboji, you have done well in expanding this village,” the baron said to the village chief.

“Th-Thank you, milord.”

“It has been fifteen years since the Land Reclamation Decree was issued, and there are no other fiefdoms which have been as successful as ours. Deboji, you are the one who has brought the villagers together and directed them through all the development thus far. I say this once again: you have done well.”

“Land Reclamation Decree”? What’s that?

Allen kept his ears perked as the feudal lord praised the village chief. After all, there was no telling when he might pick up on information that might affect how tomorrow’s great boar hunt would proceed.

Deboji bobbed his head in deference. “I did it for your and the people’s sake, milord.” His appetizer lay almost entirely untouched. Granted, eating was the last thing on the chief’s mind at the moment.

“I do apologize about the matter of the great boar meat. It was an order from His Majesty, after all.”

Hold on, the king of this country is the one telling us to hunt more great boars? The scale of this conversation suddenly blew up.

Because the topic of the conversation had now turned toward the great boar hunts, Allen started paying even more attention. He had to continue serving all the while, which kept him very busy indeed.

“H-His Majesty’s order?!”

“Indeed. To be more exact, it was Lord Carnel who instigated it. That reprobate was the one who broached the topic of the great boar hunts during a royal audience. Thanks to that big mouth of his…” Lord Granvelle seemed to quiver with anger at the memory. His glare sharpened and his attitude underwent such a sudden change that it left Deboji in a cold sweat.

Without even looking at the baron, the butler-like person, who appeared to be around sixty years old, interjected, “Master, you are frightening the good village chief. As long as the quota of twenty beasts is achieved, your reputation will surely improve once again.”

“Hm? Ah, yes. Apologies, Village Chief Deboji. Put simply, mention of the hunts reached His Majesty’s ear, and thus he ordered the number of hunts be increased.”

“Of course, milord.”

As the feudal lord revealed the circumstances behind his quota for twenty great boars—sharing only information that was absolutely necessary—it became time to bring in the main course, a meat dish. Allen laid the plates before each person at the table in turn.

After taking a bite, the feudal lord’s eyes widened. “Mm?! What is this meat? It is delicious!”

“It really is!” agreed his daughter, equally impressed.

“What sort of meat is this, Village Chief Deboji?” the feudal lord asked again.

“What? It’s, uh…”

When Deboji faltered, struggling for words to answer the sudden question, Allen sidled close to the table. “Kindly allow me the honor of answering, my lord. This is albaheron meat. The beast was caught yesterday and presented to the village chief to serve to Your Lordship. The cuts being served are of the breast, thigh, and liver. Herbs have been used in abundance to impart flavor.”

“Mm? Is that so…”

All eyes turned to look at Allen. Those at the table had all been curious this whole time about the child with very unusual black hair and eyes who was waiting on them. Allen, who noticed the gazes, bobbed his head briefly in acknowledgment before continuing to retrieve the dirty plates. Although there were only six people seated, he was the only person serving. Therefore he needed to move quickly at all times. He briskly made the trip back and forth between the table and the room’s entrance multiple times.

“What a well-raised son you have, Deboji. I have never heard you mention him before.”

“Huh? Oh no, milord. This child is not mine,” Deboji replied in a fluster. “He’s the son of a man named Rodin.”

“Rodin?”

The knight captain, who had shared the table with Allen at the feast two years ago, started. “Ah yes, I remember him now! My lord, this boy is the son of one of the two men who spearhead the great boar hunts.”

The feudal lord turned toward Allen. “You are Boar Hunter Rodin’s son?”

“Yes, my lord. I am Allen, son of Rodin. I have also been granted the honor of accompanying Your Lordship on tomorrow’s hunt.”

“Deboji, is Rodin a former noble? His son seems very well-mannered.”

“N-No, milord. Rodin’s line has always been serfs. I knew Rodin’s father personally.”

That moment, the girl who Allen thought was the feudal lord’s daughter exclaimed, “Huh?! There’s a serf in this room with us?!” Her head whipped around to stare at Allen, her charming face scrunched up in disgust.

“Wh—?!” The feudal lord turned to rebuke her. “Cecil! Serfs are important denizens of our realm too! Do not ever say anything of that nature again!”

“I-I’m very sorry, father…” the girl apologized, tears in her eyes. However, she then immediately turned to shoot Allen a dirty look, as if she was blaming him for her getting scolded. Her eyes, which were slanted rather like a hawk’s—a feature she had clearly inherited from her father—and crimson in color, overflowed with emotion.

Allen averted his gaze on purpose. Why’s she glaring at me like that? What’d I even do?

“So then, Allen,” Lord Granvelle said, picking the conversation up where he had left off. “You said you will be the one accompanying me on tomorrow’s hunt?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Make sure to properly explain what the hunters are doing at the time.”

“Of course, my lord.”

“And Zenof, make sure to listen closely to his account.”

“Yes, Your Lordship!”

Oh, the knight captain’s name is Zenof? Wait, why is he supposed to listen to me? What’s going on?

Seeing the questioning look on Allen’s face, Zenof said, “Son of Rodin, understand that the quota of twenty boars is a royal decree. In other words, it must be achieved at all costs.”

“Yes, sir.” Allen turned toward the knight captain and bowed his head to indicate that he was listening. *He’s going to explain things to me?*

“After we observe tomorrow’s hunt, if we determine that it would be difficult for this village’s hunting party to meet the quota without aid, we knights will join in as well.”

Wait, so they’re not here just to observe?

The reason why the feudal lord had come to the village was finally made clear. Although Krena Village had indeed successfully met the quota of fifteen boars last year, there was no guarantee they could reach twenty this year. The feudal lord had grown concerned and therefore brought his knights to the village to help out if necessary. It was all to ensure that the royal decree from the king was properly carried out.

“Thank you for the kind explanation, milord.” Deboji bowed in thanks, a look of understanding on his face.

“My lord,” Allen said, drawing the feudal lord’s attention back to himself.

“What is it? Do not worry. If you explain things well, my knights will take care of everything else. You may rest assured.”

“I’m sorry, my lord. That’s not it. All I wanted to say is, twenty is nothing.”

Deboji choked on his saliva as the feudal lord and knight captain both widened their eyes in surprise.

“Tomorrow, Krena Village will show you, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that we can definitely fulfill the quota of twenty great boars when we all work together.”

Allen spoke clearly and firmly, lowering his head as all six pairs of eyes focused on him. There was no hesitation whatsoever in his demeanor. He sounded so sure of himself that everyone found their breath taken away.

□□□

After the dinner was over, Allen stayed the night in the village chief’s house. The next morning, everyone sprang into action at 6 a.m. As Allen had

not brought any luggage with him, he was ready to go at any time. All he did was tie his wooden sword to his waist the way he always did.

Eventually, together with the feudal lord, the knight captain, and the knight vice-captain, he left Deboji's house. The feudal lord's daughter stayed behind at the house with the butler-like man—who turned out to be, in fact, a butler. Allen recalled him being referred to as "Sebas" during the previous night's meal.

Wow, the village square's been converted into a camping ground.

The open area in the center of town was now filled with knights' tents. They had set up camp in case they would indeed have to take part in the great boar hunts and would therefore need to remain in this village for a while. And without quarters or anywhere else to stay, naturally they needed to erect their own tents.

The knights had finished their preparations by the time the feudal lord and his group reached them. Instead of riding their horses, they were to march on foot behind the feudal lord.

Oh hey, I see Dogora!

Allen spotted his friend peering at the knights from a distance away with sparkling eyes. There were twenty knights this time, twice the number that came to see Krena years ago.

Soon enough, the procession reached the village gate where a group of forty commoners and serfs were standing in wait. This was the hunting party, including everyone who had participated in the previous years' hunts plus a few newcomers.

"They're wearing armor!" the knight captain exclaimed as he noticed what half the men had on.

Allen nodded. "Yes, sir. That is leather armor created from great boar hide. We have not been able to outfit everyone as of yet, so we prioritized those who needed it most."

"What do you mean by 'need it most'?"

"It would be easier to explain at the hunt itself, sir."

A look of understanding dawned on the feudal lord's face. "So this was the reason behind Deboji's petition."

Last year, the feudal lord had received the report that this hunting party had successfully brought down eighteen great boars. However, Deboji had, on their behalf, requested permission to keep everything other than the meat for eight of the eighteen carcasses. This, too, had been Allen's suggestion.

Because the feudal lord wanted meat, they would send the meat. However, Allen's idea was to use the skin, bones, tusks, and horns of eight great boars as an investment to improve the quality of future hunts. Of course, Allen had gone to Rodin and Gerda first, and it was the two of them who had approached Deboji.

The feudal lord had accepted their petition, especially in light of how the group had surpassed the quota of fifteen boars. He had agreed, on the condition that they successfully manage to hunt twenty this year.

"Yes, my lord," Allen replied. "The materials we saved went toward preparations that will ensure we can fulfill the quota of twenty great boars this year."

"Impressive."

"Of course, it was my father, Rodin's idea," Allen added. His aim today was to hype up Rodin as much as possible, emphasizing the enormity of his contributions in the hope of convincing the feudal lord to grant his entire family commoner status. As such, Allen was crediting Rodin with all the ideas he himself had come up with. After all, his ideas would sound more credible coming from an adult than a child anyway.

As everyone was now gathered, they all began making their way toward the hunting grounds. The serfs and commoners walked ahead with the knights taking up the rear. There were only two men on horseback—the knight captain, who ordered Allen to join him in the saddle, and the feudal lord, who had foregone the comfort of the carriage that he had ridden to Krena Village in.

Three hours later, the group arrived at the usual hunting grounds. There was a strange new structure there now. It was a two-meter-tall platform made of wood that was large enough for ten people to stand on.

"Mm? What is that?" the feudal lord asked.

"This was created to make your viewing easier, my lord. If you would please climb to the top."

The lord nodded, then climbed up the ladder on the back of the structure. He took one of the seats that had been installed at the top. Allen and Zenof also climbed up after him. The vice-captain remained on the ground, coordinating with the other knights to surround the structure as protection of their lord.

When you think about it, the feudal lord coming in person to a forest filled with monsters is pretty incredible, isn't it? That must take a lot of guts. Is the royal decree that huge of a deal? What used to be just "hunt so we can eat" now has so much more hanging on the line.

"What happens now?" Zenof asked. Allen caught on that he was supposed to explain to the knight captain and not the feudal lord directly, who was currently staring into the depths of the forest with his hawk-like eyes.

"First, three people will go and lure a great boar toward this location."

"Then?"

"Simply put, the rest then surround it— Ah, the three fishers are heading out now." They watched Pekej and his two companions vanish into the forest.

“And those down there holding large shields will be using them to stop the great boar’s charge?” the knight captain asked, looking impressed at their design.

The hide, bones, tusks, and horns from eight great boars had gone toward making a pair of two-meter-high leather shields, seventeen pieces of leather armor, and three chest protectors. Krena Village did not have an armor craftsman capable of creating everything listed above, so they had called upon one from a neighboring village. All of the leftover materials—and there was quite a bit, considering the size of the great boars—had gone to the craftsman in exchange for him not charging any money.

“Yes, sir. With two of them, we are able to pin a charging boar from both sides.”

“I see.”

The knight captain observed the serfs and commoners in their positions as well as the two impressive shields. He already had a general idea of what was to come.

An hour passed, but Pekej and his men had yet to return. They were the team equipped with the three chest protectors. These were defensive items designed to protect only the vital chest area while still being as lightweight as possible.

Hm? It’s taking kinda long. Are they having trouble finding the right target? Pekej once told me that there’re several hundred great boars in this forest and that they migrate en masse from the foot of the White Dragon Mountains.

“By the way, is Sword Lord Krena doing well?” Zenof asked, as if being considerate by breaking the awkward silence.

“Absolutely, sir.” More like, too well. She’s practically a bottomless fountain of energy.

“I see. We will be sending her a tutor three springs from now. Let her know when you can.”

“Of course, sir.” So, it’d be when she’s eleven, and she’d have one year to study.

“Hm? Will that be sufficient? Can we not send the tutor earlier?” the feudal lord interjected. After all, if Krena failed the entrance exam, he would be made a laughingstock in the capital.

“Then I shall instruct Sebas to send the tutor the year after next instead.”

“Mm, do that. If she fails, that headmaster *will* reject her, Sword Lord or no.”

Looks like Lord Granvelle is quite the worrywart. All right, so it’ll be a year and a half before Krena starts studying. When I imagine her wearing a headband with the word “Success!” on it—

The thunderous sound approaching the hunting grounds dragged Allen back from his thoughts. “Here it comes, sir.”

“Mm.”

A cry of “GUMOOOOOHHHHHH!!!” shook the very air in the clearing. At the same time, Rodin roared a word of encouragement that all the other men immediately returned in kind. Pekej burst from the treeline, soon followed by the massive body of a great boar. It was hot on his heels, as if it was blind to everything but Pekej. This was thanks to Pekej’s masterful pulling technique. He intentionally kept himself just out of the boar’s reach.

Pekej dashed between the large shields. Standing behind the shields was the four-man team led by Gerda. Instead of holding spears like before, they were doubled up and braced for impact.

Sure enough, the boar charged straight into the large shields. Both groups worked together to stop it in its tracks. The huge tusks on the beast’s snout dented the shields, but they otherwise held fast.

“This is how we stop the monster’s charge. That shield is made with two layers of leather taken from the back of a great boar, the toughest part of its hide. We also have two men handling one shield together.”

“I see.”

“And now, after stopping the beast, we encircle it to stop it from struggling.”

As Allen continued with the detailed commentary, the shield bearers backed off. A group carrying the same two-meter-long spears from the previous hunts took their place to pin the monster down, with special focus on its head. Then, at Gerda’s order, another group wielding four-meter-long spears stepped forward from behind. There were now so many hunters that their attacks rained down on the beast from all directions, not just its front.

“The long spear group is something we added last year. It is perfect for incorporating newcomers lacking experience.”

“You have also distributed the defensive equipment prioritizing the shield bearers and those wielding the short spears.”

“That is correct, sir. The long spear group has trained to avoid accidentally stabbing the front line from the back, but just in case, the front line is wearing armor that protects their backs, necks, and heads.”

The knight captain nodded in acknowledgment, his eyes still fixed on the action. With the monster properly locked down, it was time for Rodin’s team of spearmen to shine. They stabbed with all their weight behind their thrusts, aiming for the beast’s vital areas.

“The hide of a great boar is extremely tough. We aim for its neck after robbing it of its freedom of movement. Ah, someone has punctured its jugular.”

“Well done!” the knight captain exclaimed inadvertently upon seeing the fountain of blood suddenly gush out.

“My lord.”

“Yes, Zenof?”

“These people may not be knights. However, they are warriors. Boar-hunting warriors.”

Just like knights, members of this hunting party each had their own clear-cut role. Knights had spearmen, bowmen, and scouts, and the absence of any one group could greatly affect the performance of the remaining groups. Zenof had seen a similar framework in how this great boar hunt was being carried out. He was impressed with how all members of the hunting party performed their respective duties with full understanding of the role they played. He repeated “Wonderful!” several more times before the great boar finally collapsed onto its side.

“That was indeed a spectacular battle. I am now reassured that this group does indeed have the ability to hunt twenty great boars within the year,” Lord Granvelle declared. He had been nodding multiple times while the hunt was going on.

“That certainly does seem to be the case,” Zenof agreed before jerking with a start. “Hm? The other two scouts appear to have returned. Why are they running at full speed?”

The hunt was supposedly over, and yet the two men burst from the trees just as Pekej had done. Before Allen had time to reply, however, the captain’s answer itself came barreling into view.

“GUMOOHHHHHH!”

Two great boars came charging in, their eyes bloodshot. With their pursuers gaining on them, the two fishers dashed straight toward the rest of the hunting party.

“What?! Leibrand! There are two boars!” Zenof shouted from the top of the viewing stand, ordering the troops below to ready themselves for battle. They had to protect both the feudal lord and the members of the hunting party.

However, just as Leibrand began commanding his men to get into formation, Allen said in a calm voice, “Apologies, Sir Zenof.”

“What is it at this time?!”

“The hunt is still in progress. Please have your men stand down.”

“What?!” exclaimed both Zenof and Lord Granvelle, the latter of whom had also been listening.

Allen continued, “As I mentioned yesterday, we are here today to demonstrate, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that we hunters of Krena Village can definitely meet your quota. The hunt continues.”

Even as Allen was speaking, the two great boars had almost closed in on the hunters. The knights would not make it in time even if they were to charge forward now.

“THERE’RE TWO OF THEM THIS TIME! GET FIRED UP, MEN!!!”

“YESSIR!!!”

The forty-or-so men suddenly psyched themselves up, responding to Rodin’s encouragement with an even louder roar than before. There was no fear or hesitation in their manner as they surged forward and assumed formation in front of the carcass of the great boar they had already killed.

The fishers dashed past the two large shields. Seconds later, the shields slammed against the charging great boars. Unlike before, there were now only two people holding back each beast. The vicious horns on the monsters' snouts gouged the shields' surfaces. The shield-bearers retreated one step, then another. Their shields were caved in, but were still holding fast. Before long, they forced the great boars to a halt.

"They've stopped! Split up and surround them!"

Following Gerda's command, both his team and the group wielding long spears divided and swiftly assumed positions, their steps sure and practiced. Half of a party of forty was still more than enough to deal with a single great boar. Without ado, Rodin and his team also broke up into four smaller groups to stab at the beasts from both sides, aiming for their vital areas just as before.

All right, the timing for bringing two great boars right after killing one was perfect! All that practice paid off.

Before, Allen had always wondered why the hunting party only ever killed one great boar per hunt. The idea behind the pulling strategy—at least, in the games that he used to play—was to kill *every* monster that aggroed. Losing mobs on purpose was an unthinkable waste. When he heard the details, however, he learned that the hunting party was intentionally splitting up great boar groups because, quite simply, they were only capable of handling a single boar.

So then, the question became, "Why is it that they can only hunt one?" After really mulling it over, Allen concluded that the fault in their strategy lay not in the hunters' levels, weapons, or numbers. No, it was their armor. The serfs were not equipped with proper armor able to withstand attacks from great boars. Hemp provided practically zero protection. Even Rodin, who had been participating in these hunts for over a decade, was left at death's door after taking a single attack.

However, procuring armor was not easy. The reward for participating in the hunts was meat, which would be used up to sustain each hunter and their family's livelihood. No one had the financial leeway to buy themselves armor. Compared to the cost of the short sword Allen had inquired about back in the village weapons shop, the price of a large steel shield was astronomical.

The only thing that the villagers could afford to upgrade was their spears. The two-meter-long ones were especially short for weapons classified as polearms. This length was a compromise—if the spear was too long, it would snap when under stress; if it was too short, the wielders were susceptible to attacks from the great boar's tusks and horns. And this group of hunters had been hunting for ten years using these same fittings.

The way Allen saw it, continuously upgrading one's equipment was a basic of hunting. By upgrading, one improves their ability to hunt more efficiently and chase bigger prey. True to that theory, Allen acquired shields

and armor for the party, and they were now powerful enough to hunt two boars at the same time.

Allen heaved a small sigh of relief seeing the strategy go off without a hitch. The group had only attempted it twice before; today's hunt was their third time.

If Lord Granvelle had come a bit later, we would have been able to get more practice in, but I suppose this is fine.

Soon enough, blood spurted from the neck of the second great boar thanks to someone piercing its jugular. Then the third monster also succumbed in short order.

"Ohhhh!" Zenof exclaimed. "The killing blow has been dealt!"

"And that is all three great boars. I am glad it went well," Allen replied.

"A job well done indeed. And since the party killed three today, there are only seventeen left to go."

"A correction if I may, sir. Including these three from today, we have now killed ten this year."

Both the feudal lord and knight captain exclaimed, "What?!"

The hunting party had already gone out several times after receiving word of the feudal lord's visit. More specifically, today marked their fourth hunt of the year.

"As I said, we will be able to meet the quota without issue. With this, we've made our case."

The feudal lord's sharp and somewhat slanted eyes stared at the hunters happily patting each other's backs for a hunt well done. There were traces of a warm smile on his face.

"That is a relief. You have convinced me that I can trust this village to bring down twenty great boars this year." In other words, he was indirectly acknowledging that he would not be deploying his knights nor relocating serfs from other villages.

Allen bowed. "Your words give us reassurance, my lord. However, there are two requests I have that would affect the future of these hunts."

"What manner of requests?" the knight captain asked, looking mystified. "What is there to improve upon after today's results?"

"There are members of the hunting party who are still underequipped. And if possible, we would want at least two more large shields."

"Hm…"

Allen proceeded to elaborate. The armor was self-evident, but if the party had three large shields, they could eventually hunt three great boars at the same time. The fourth one would be a spare. There was no telling how long a shield would last, as they had only been used four times as of today. It would be wise to have an extra on hand.

"I see. So you want to improve the party's equipment in preparation for next year's hunts and beyond."

“Yes, sir. What’s more, there is something else I am worried about. As long as this issue is not addressed, I fear it might become difficult to continue these hunts.”

The matter that concerned Allen was something that would grow larger along with the expanding scale of the hunts. He very much wanted to make the powers that be understand the problem right here and now, especially because it would affect his own family.

The feudal lord nodded. “Speak.”

“Yes, my lord. At this rate, the hunters will eventually lose interest in joining the hunts, and the size of the hunting party will begin to shrink.”

“How do you figure?”

“And my proposed solution for this problem is wine.”

“Wine…?”

Both the feudal lord and knight captain looked baffled. Allen continued, explaining that if nothing was done, the value of boar meat would plummet in Krena Village. Previously, only ten great boars were hunted each year. If this was to suddenly become twenty boars, or even more, the local market would become saturated with meat. With excessive supply, demand—and therefore value—would decrease. Consequently, hunters would need more meat than before to trade for the same amount of firewood, salt, and other necessities.

The knight captain nodded in understanding. “I see. So the wine is to raise morale.”

“Of course, that is one aspect of it. At the same time, the possibility of bartering meat for wine stabilizes its value.”

Wine was a consumable—it would disappear when drunk. Therefore, if it could be obtained with meat, it would functionally help to drain the supply of meat from the market. It would not make sense for the wine merchants to use the meat here in this market overflowing with meat, so they would likely trade it in other places that still had a strong demand for it, such as surrounding villages or the capital of the fiefdom.

“So the system would help stabilize the value of meat *and* serve as a motivator for the hunters,” the knight captain murmured, looking very impressed.

“Yes, sir. It doesn’t *have* to be wine, of course. Anything else that is a consumable—fruit being another example—would do.”

Part of what prompted Allen to bring this up was to prevent the value of albaheron meat from plummeting as well, as he planned on continuing to hunt them in large numbers should the feudal lord end up not giving his family commoner status. He was aiming for multiple birds with one stone, to borrow the saying.

“This is a very well-thought-out proposition. I cannot give you a definitive answer right now, but know that I will bring it back for consideration.”

“Thank you, my lord.”

“And this was Rodin’s idea, yes?” Lord Granvelle asked, beating Allen to the line.

The boy nodded. “Yes, my lord. My *father* Rodin devised the whole thing.”

The feudal lord then closed his eyes as if retreating into his thoughts. Silence fell over the top of the viewing platform.

After a short while, the knight captain asked, “What should we do, my lord? Should we return to the village?”

“We might as well. Allen, you have done a fine job today. Zenof, when we return, tell Deboji to summon both Rodin and Gerda.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Oh? Is he going to reward them? Please give them commoner status!

With that, the great boar hunt under the feudal lord’s observation ended as a resounding success.

Chapter 13: Setting Off

The twenty knights who accompanied the feudal lord helped the hunters carry the three great boars back to the village. The rest of the villagers buzzed in excitement, murmurs of “They killed three again today” spreading like wildfire. Everyone surged out to take part in the butchering. Even though the hunting party returned before 3 p.m., it was still likely to last until after sunset.

In the meantime, Rodin, Gerda, and Allen all found themselves summoned to the village chief’s house.

Rodin and Gerda were feeling greatly relieved from having successfully demonstrated to the feudal lord what their hunting party was capable of. Now there was no need to worry about the current villagers losing portions of their land to newcomers transplanted from other settlements. Rodin was not worried about himself—he had made significant contributions and commanded enough influence that he knew his land would not be repossessed. Instead, he had been worried for the families who could not afford to send any of their members to participate in the hunts.

When the group of three walked into the village chief’s house, they were told that the feudal lord was already waiting for them in the hall. They were allowed to pass straight through without even stopping to clean up, despite wearing hemp outfits stained with sweat and great boar blood. They complied and made their way over, finding Deboji waiting before the door. Together, the group of four walked into the room.

The tables had been cleared away and the feudal lord was sitting in a seat at the far end. The seat next to his was occupied by his daughter, Cecil. The butler, knight captain, and knight vice-captain stood lined up against the wall to their side.

After proceeding to the center of the room, the four stopped in a row, then kneeled with their heads bowed. Only then did the feudal lord open his mouth.

“First, Deboji. You have done well in overseeing this village’s development. Fifteen years have passed since the Land Reclamation Decree was issued. Many other fiefdoms have failed in their efforts to establish frontier villages, but Krena Village is an example of success unmatched by any other. Your stewardship is truly commendable, and you have my heartfelt thanks.” The feudal lord was repeating what he had said at last night’s feast. This village had turned out this way because Deboji had been at its helm. This was why the feudal lord started by praising him.

“Th-Thank you for your words of praise, milord.” Deboji lowered his head even further to express his gratitude.

“Next. Rodin, Gerda.”

“Yes, m’lord.”

“Yes, m’lord.”

“I have witnessed your great boar hunt with my own eyes. It was a remarkable sight indeed, one beyond description. To you, too, I give you my thanks as your lord.”

Although Lord Granvelle’s eyes were as sharp as ever, his voice was warm and genuine. Rodin and Gerda also lowered their heads deeply in response to the recognition they received.

“If I do nothing to reward such exemplary achievements, it would reflect badly on me as lord of this realm. Why, I would be shirking my duties.”

Here we go! It’s time for the quest rewards! Don’t give us money, we don’t need it! Make us commoners instead! Pretty please with a cherry on top! Allen focused all his attention to his ears even as his head remained bowed.

“Rodin and Gerda, you, as well as your wives and children, are commoners as of today. Fulfill your respective duties in your new capacity.”

Both men bowed once more and said in unison, “Thank you, m’lord.”

HELL YEAHHHH! I’m now a commoner! What should I do?! I have the right to go hunting outside the village whenever I want now! How ‘bout I start with taking down the white dragon in the White Dragon Mountains?!

It took Allen all of his willpower not to start drooling. The dream he had been nursing for eight long years was finally about to come true. The corners of his mouth naturally curled upward in a grin.

After that, the feudal lord also granted commoner status to all the hunters who had been in the hunting party for over ten years, as well as their wives and children. He also promised that when the currently single hunters married, the same would be conferred on their spouses. In this way, everyone who had been hunting the great boars for over a decade finally received the recognition and reward due to them.

The feudal lord said to the village chief, “Make sure to check with each and every one of these men whether they wish to become a commoner or to remain a serf. Being a commoner comes with its own obligations, so this is voluntary. Report back to me afterward.”

Unlike serfs, commoners were subject to a head tax. The larger a family was, the more they would have to pay in taxes every year. As such, the feudal lord was giving everyone who qualified a choice.

“And with that, I have now fulfilled my duties as lord of this domain.”

Ensuring that his people could fulfill the royal decree of hunting twenty great boars was his duty. Now that he had done so, he could return home with peace of mind.

However, just as it seemed like the audience was wrapping up, the butler interjected, “Master, permission to speak?”

“Granted.”

“His Majesty also wished to know what prompted these men to start hunting great boars in the first place.”

“Hm? Oh, right! So he did. Thank you for the reminder, Sebas.”

What’s this now?

As the butler slightly nodded with his eyes closed, a look of puzzlement came over Rodin's face. The feudal lord turned back to him.

"Apologies. This is not an official royal decree, but there is something that His Majesty wanted me to ask you on his behalf. Rodin—no, Boar Hunter Rodin."

"Y-Yes, m'lord?"

"His Majesty was curious about what originally gave you the idea to hunt great boars."

The Land Reclamation Decree had gone out to all fiefdoms in the kingdom. Amongst all the frontier villages nobles had struggled to establish, not only did Krena Village take hold, it had managed to produce a consistent supply of boar meat. Consequently, the king held it up as an example that the other nobles were to emulate. For the sake of the other nobles' reference, he wanted to hear the full story of how the hunts started.

"The story…of how we started…" Rodin's face clouded over. Silence filled the room as he visibly struggled to get his words out.

"Hm? What's the matter?" the feudal lord asked, confused by Rodin holding his tongue on what was supposedly a tale of his own exploits, something that most men would leap at the opportunity to recount.

Just as he was about to press Rodin for a reason, Gerda interrupted. "I am very sorry, m'lord, but this story would be difficult for Rodin to tell. May I do so in his place?"

Speaking of which, I've never heard it myself either.

Rodin's face darkened even more, but he did not speak up to stop Gerda. When the feudal lord nodded to indicate his permission, Gerda began.

"When we first arrived in this land, it was the start of spring. There were a hundred of us serfs. This was, uh…thirteen years ago."

Founding a village meant creating it from nothing. This was, naturally, extremely time-consuming. It would be difficult to make any progress in winter with snow covering everything, so it made sense to start right after the snow from the previous winter had finished melting away.

The feudal lord had decided on the location where to found the village and conveyed this through an envoy. At the time, it was an area sparsely covered with trees all around, roughly a two days' walk from the previous village. The settlers had to start with chopping those trees down and pulling their roots up when they first arrived.

Rodin's eyes were closed tightly and his clenched fists were trembling as Gerda continued, speaking clumsily in his best effort at being respectful.

"By the time we finished clearing away all the trees, it was autumn. And then…"

Then disaster had struck. There was no way the serfs, who had never left their old village before, could have foreseen it. Nor could the commoners who relocated with them, for that matter. Their original village was two days' away, after all, which was quite the distance.

“The wheat and potatoes that we had brought along to survive the winter got ransacked by great boars.”

Whenever autumn arrived, the forest surrounding the new village would receive a sudden influx of great boars. None of the founding villagers had known of this beforehand, and so they ended up learning the hard way. They had set up a fence to keep monsters away, but it was far from enough to stop beasts that weigh a tonne each. Gerda described how half of the food in their stores was eaten or destroyed.

The feudal lord’s brows drew together in a frown as what he had expected to be a heroic saga took a dark turn.

“So we got together to discuss what to do. Some folks wanted to return to our old village.”

They could have brought all their remaining food and walked the two-day journey back to their previous village. Then, once spring returned, they could have come back and resumed the reclamation work.

“However, many of us serfs had come to settle this village because we had no way of feeding ourselves back home. Even if we were to have gone back, no one would’ve welcomed us.”

The residents of the former village had scraped together enough food to tide the pioneers through winter with the understanding that they would never come back. If they did return, not only would they not have been welcome, they probably would not have received any food or provisions either.

“As it turned out, the large majority of us *could not* return.”

“I see.” The feudal lord shot a look at Deboji, who bowed his head, looking decidedly uncomfortable. The village chief was aware this had happened, but never reported it up the chain of command.

“That was when Rodin said, ‘Let’s kill the boars and eat them to survive the winter.’”

His actions had fit the term “champion” to a tee, according to Gerda. He had unified the men and led them into the forest with hoes, spades, pickaxes, and everything else imaginable in hand. It was not just the twenty men who had made up the hunting party up until recently—no, at that time there were more than forty of them. That was, in fact, virtually every one of the village’s menfolk.

There had not been any strategy back then—the three-team method was not developed until later. Luckily, the group had happened upon a solitary great boar by chance. They had hacked at it in sheer desperation until, out of sheer luck, someone’s pickax pierced the beast’s jugular. If it had not been for an almost miraculous chain of coincidences, the group could have just as easily been wiped out completely.

“And that was how you hunted the very first great boar?” Lord Granvelle asked. “That is a remarkable story. Why then do you not boast of it, Rodin? Judging by your boy’s face, it is clear to me that this is his first time hearing it.”

“I…I am sorry, m’lord. It’s just…I lost my friend during that hunt…” Rodin stammered.

It had been a dangerous hunt, one that was frantic. Many had ended up severely injured; several others died. Even so, the remaining hunters desperately had continued the hunt. When the beast died, there was a chance for everyone who had participated to overcome a Trial of the Gods. The reward for doing so was a new lease on life in the form of healing from all current injuries.

“And sure enough, all of us overcame a Trial of the Gods, and our wounds disappeared,” Rodin struggled to explain. “However, a close friend of mine…did not manage to hold on long enough.”

His friend had died before the final blow landed.

“Even though the hunt was something that all of us decided together, Rodin still feels responsible for what happened. I’ve been telling him all this time that it’s not his burden to bear, but he won’t listen,” Gerda said before continuing his account.

When the group of hunters had returned to the village, they then shared the meat with everyone equally, making no distinction between hunters and non-hunters. Thanks to this, the village had managed to survive its first winter. But, after seeing the number of casualties and the severity of people’s injuries, fewer men chose to participate in hunts after that, decreasing the size of their party to only half their original number—down to just twenty or so.

“And that’s the full story of our first great boar hunt.”

I see, so father saw his friend in that commoner.

While listening to their account, Allen thought back to the incident two years ago, when Rodin had returned home bearing a life-threatening injury. He had thrown himself in harm’s way to protect a teenage commoner. He—as well as his late friend—had also been but fifteen years old during their first hunt. Perhaps that was why, despite having a family at home waiting for him, he still ended up prioritizing the boy’s life over his own. Or maybe his body moved instinctively.

Rodin remained quiet, his head bowed. He was propping himself up with his hands, but his arms trembled as he struggled with the flood of memories playing in his mind.

“I…apologize for prying.”

“No, it’s…it’s fine, m’lord.”

Silence filled the room.

“That…is truly not a tale to spread around,” Lord Granvelle said after some thought. “I will work out what to tell His Majesty. And… Hmm…”

Once again, he fell into silence. This time, it was the butler who spoke up. “What is it you are thinking, Master?”

“Sebas, this changes things. My eyes tell me that this man, Rodin, is not lying. And if that is the case, it means he is the one who saved this village.”

“Yes, Master. That would be the case.”

The feudal lord turned back toward those kneeling before him. “Rodin, I shall grant you one more reward.”

“One…*more* reward, m’lord?”

The feudal lord had already granted Rodin and his entire family commoner status, something that would have normally cost them fifty gold coins. Mention of another reward on top of it left Rodin flustered.

“As I said, it is my job as lord of this fiefdom to ensure that those who contribute are rewarded accordingly. Name anything you desire.”

“A-Anything, m’lord?”

“So, there *is* something you want. Try saying it out loud.”

A reward? For father? I wonder what he would ask for. The only thing that comes to mind is wine, though.

“I-In that case, I have a request, m’lord,” Rodin said, lowering his head. “Please let my son here work in your house.”

Wait, what?

“Hmm?”

“Unlike me, Allen is smart. I am sure he would be of great help to you, m’lord.”

“Interesting. You want to send your son to enter the service of a baron?”

Hold on, father! That’s not it! Don’t go there! I really, reeeally don’t like where this is going!

Panic was painted all over Allen’s face, but Rodin failed to notice it. “Yes, m’lord. Please use him as a houseboy or however else you see fit. I beg of you, please allow him to work for you!”

Seeing the look his master was sending his way, the butler replied, “I have no objections. It seems clear to me that the child is indeed bright and intelligent.”

Standing beside him, the knight captain also nodded approvingly.

What?! Why isn’t anyone stopping this?! My ideal dream of going hunting every day is getting further and further away from me! Think, Allen! Think!

More than anything else, Allen loved hunting, and he loved leveling up. Working at the feudal lord’s place was on the extreme opposite end of the spectrum of things he wanted to do. Presumably, serving the feudal lord would mean lots of rules and restrictions. Worst case, he could end up with less freedom than even serfs had. And so Allen racked his brains as hard as he could. He needed to come up with some way to break through this situation at any cost.

“A houseboy? Hm…that’s not quite right,” the feudal lord murmured, stroking his well-groomed mustache.

A disappointed “Huh?” escaped Rodin’s lips. He had almost been sure that his request would be accepted.

Oh? Is the lord going to say no? Go for it. You really should say no!

“He did a splendid job as our guide on today’s hunt, as well as serving our table last night. I am as impressed with him as I am with you, Rodin. You have raised a fine son.”

“Th-Thank you, m’lord.”

“Consequently, Allen will become a manservant of House Granvelle.”

“A manservant?! Are you sure, m’lord?!” Rodin was so shocked his voice broke.

Uh, is a houseboy different from a manservant? No, no, that’s not what I should be thinking about right now!

“Is that fine, Sebas?”

“Absolutely, Master.”

“Allen! The feudal lord said he’d accept you as his manservant!”

Rodin completely forgot that he was in Lord Granvelle’s presence and turned to ruffle Allen’s hair vigorously in celebration. He was so overjoyed, tears were flowing down his face.

Gerda also chimed in. “Good for you, Allen! His Lordship’s offering you an opportunity that us serfs’d never see in a million years!” He then continued going on at length about how incredible the offer was; meanwhile, Allen looked dazed, as if his soul had left his body.

The feudal lord remained silent, merely observing. He had just made Rodin—who had contributed so much to the village—recall a memory so traumatic it gave him the shakes. This was therefore his way of atoning for that transgression.

The baron smiled with satisfaction at the ear-to-ear grin on Rodin’s face, then declared, “Allen, son of Rodin. Be my manservant and join my House Granvelle at the foot of the table.”

“Huh?” Allen looked so confused, a cartoonish question mark was practically visible above his head.

If I say yes here…would I be completely swearing away my chance at a life of freedom?!

“Hm? What’s the matter?” Now it was the feudal lord’s turn to look confused, as he had expected an immediate affirmative answer.

Rodin, who apparently thought Allen did not know how to reply, said, “Allen, this is where you should say, ‘It would be an honor, m’lord.’”

No, hold on, seriously, what am I supposed to do here?!

Allen looked at Rodin, whose tears were still overflowing from his eyes and coursing down his cheeks; he was just *that* happy. Allen realized this was the first time he had ever seen his father cry. This was his father, the man who had dedicated himself to raising Allen over the past eight years. Allen had indeed lived thirty-five years as Kenichi before coming to this world, but he deeply respected Rodin and his way of life from the bottom of his heart. He was glad that he had been born as Rodin’s child.

For his family’s sake, the man had tilled the fields, day in and day out without vacations, and had put his life on the line to face the great boars

every autumn. Rodin also cared deeply for his companions and was a role model to the other serfs.

That same Rodin now had tears streaming down his face.

There's no way I can say no to that face, is there? It's outright impossible.

"It…It would be an honor, my lord."

And in this way, Allen became a manservant of House Granvelle.

□ □ □

It was already dusk by the time the audience with Lord Granvelle ended. Allen was informed that he would be accompanying the baron when he returned to Granvelle City tomorrow afternoon, and that he would not have any serving duties that night. He returned home with his father, where Rodin told Theresia about how Allen had become their feudal lord's manservant. Theresia congratulated her son, her expression sorrowful.

The night passed, and morning broke. Allen, who had not slept very well, offered to draw water for the family, then headed out. When he met the serfs at the well, their eyes were warm. These were all faces that he had seen many, many times over the past eight years.

Over a single night, news of the feudal lord granting commoner status to all twenty members of the original hunting party and their families had spread throughout the entire village. Quite a few of the hunters had already decided to accept the offer.

"Hey there, Allen! I heard you'll be working at a noble's house! Good for you!"

"Thank you very much."

The serfs at the well all wished Allen the best, and he thanked them one by one. When he got home and finished refilling the family jar, he found Mash still sulking from the night before. He complained that he'd be lonely with Allen gone. For his part, Allen had also wanted to be there for Mash, especially when he would undergo his Appraisal Ceremony next year.

Allen ate his breakfast and cleaned himself up, then tied his well-used wooden sword to his waist.

"Here, take this with you," Rodin said, thrusting a small jute bag at his son.

"I already said last night, I don't need it," Allen returned.

Inside the bag they were pushing back and forth was the more than three hundred silver Allen had earned hunting albaherons. Allen expected to receive a salary while working at Lord Granvelle's mansion, so he wanted Rodin to keep the money for an emergency.

"Doesn't matter! Take it!" Rodin insisted gruffly.

In the end, Allen folded. He reluctantly counted out a hundred silver and stashed it in his luggage. "Luggage" might have been an overstatement, as he had few belongings to bring with him. In fact, everything he owned fit inside a single small jute bag. It had taken almost no time at all for him to pack.

“Ah, we managed to catch you!”

Just as Allen was about to leave, Gerda arrived, with Mathilda, Krena, and Lily in tow. Allen had planned on dropping by their house on his way to the residential area, but they had come to see him off instead.

Krena, having heard about Allen’s departure from her father, looked absolutely heartbroken. “Do you really have to go?”

Allen nodded. “Mm-hm. You take care of yourself, okay?”

The girl looked down at the ground, at a loss for words. Allen noticed she was clutching her wooden sword as usual.

“All right, let’s play knight,” Allen offered.

“Huh? Play knight?”

“Yup. You up for a round?”

“Always!”

Good, I got her on board. I want her to see me off with a smile.

The moment Allen mentioned “playing knight,” Krena perked back up. However, they could not play in the garden, as it was currently packed with twenty albaheron carcasses. So they stepped outside the garden wall, their families watching on.

Krena took up position a distance away from Allen, then declared, “I am Krena the knight! Let us fight with honor!”

A hot sensation welled up in Allen’s chest upon hearing this line—the same line that he had heard so many times over the past five years. He tightened his grip on his weapon and replied, “I am Allen, manservant of House Granvelle. Sword Lord Krena, come at me!”

A look of surprise came over Krena’s face. Allen’s line was different from usual. This time he had called her “Sword Lord.”

Allen’s new identity was the fruit of Rodin’s efforts after risking his life hunting great boars for thirteen years. Allen had purposely taken up this new title out of respect for his father.

“What’s the matter? Are you not coming at me?”

“Here I go!”

So began their final session of playing knight. Both eight-year-olds swung their wooden swords with incredible power and speed far beyond what other children their age could achieve. Allen’s and Krena’s parents had watched this scene countless times before.

“One final bout to say goodbye, huh,” Rodin murmured.

“Sounds just like something they’d do,” Gerda responded, chuckling slightly.

However, the spectators quickly noticed something was off. All these years, Krena had always been on the offensive and Allen on the defensive. Krena overpowered Allen in every one of their sessions. Today, however, Allen was the one with the upper hand.

“Huh?!” Krena had noticed as well.

“What’s wrong, Sword Lord Krena?! Is that all you’ve got?!”

Krena answered his provocation with a heavier swing, but Allen dodged it and returned a counterattack. Krena was the one on the ropes now.

As soon as he knew he would have to leave everyone, Allen had decided that his farewell to Krena would be playing knights. He had also made up his mind to win this last match.

“What?! How?!” Krena was completely bewildered. She had never lost, not even once. Now, however, she found herself overwhelmed. Allen’s movements had changed from those she had grown used to seeing over the past five years. He was faster than he had ever been before. Even the four adults’ eyes were wide with surprise.

To make a long story short, Allen had Synthesized a whole bunch of Bird E cards ahead of their match. Thanks to this, he had given his Agility a massive boost.

Name: Allen
Age: 8
Class: Summoner
Level: 7
HP: 152 (190)
MP: 208 (260) + 200
Attack: 75 (94)
Endurance: 75 (94)
Agility: 144 (181) + 200
Intelligence: 216 (270) + 200
Luck: 144 (181) + 200
Skills: Summoning {4}, Creation {4}, Synthesis {4}, Strengthening {4}, Expansion {3}, Storage, Deletion, Sword Mastery {3}, Throwing {3}
XP: 0/7,000
Skill LevelsSummoning: 4
Creation: 4
Synthesis: 4
Strengthening: 4
Skill ExperienceCreation: 47,946/1,000,000
Synthesis: 47,900/1,000,000
Strengthening: 47,640/1,000,000
Creatable SummonsInsect: E, F, G, H
Beast: E, F, G, H
Bird: E, F, G
Grass: E, F
Stone: E
HolderInsect:
Beast:
Bird: E x 20

Grass: E x 20
Stone:

As a Summoner, Allen's Agility was ranked A. In other words, his class was itself designed with an emphasis on Agility. Now that he was Lvl. 7 and had twenty Bird E cards, his total Agility was over three hundred. There was no way for Krena, who was still only Lvl. 1, to keep up. It was not long before the tip of Allen's wooden sword was at Krena's throat. The match was decided.

"I lost," Krena mumbled, looking stunned.

"Looks like it is a draw between us, Sword Lord Krena," Allen declared. I'm glad that worked out. I used up almost all the magic stones I had, but it was worth it.

"Huh?"

The way Krena saw it, she had lost completely. All four of the adults thought the same.

"This is a draw. There's no doubt about it," Allen repeated.

"A...draw?"

"That's right. A draw, a tie. Sword Lord Krena, it looks like we will have to wait until we meet again to determine the winner."

"Huh?"

"Our match remains unfinished. The outcome will have to be deferred." Allen reverted to his normal tone. "When we meet again. Okay, Krena?"

When they were both older, they would see each other again. It was a promise.

A smile blossomed on Krena's face. "Of course! Next time we meet, I'll be waaay stronger than you!"

There's the face I wanted to see.

Allen, however, was more worldly-wise. He knew that once Krena turned twelve, she would leave for Academy City. After she graduated, she would then likely go on to serve the royal family. Their stations in life and social statuses would be vastly different. He might never see her again—in fact, that was the more probable outcome. Still, he wanted to part ways with her through this undecided match. He had even used up almost his entire stock of magic stones to ensure this result.

After having said his goodbyes with Krena, Allen turned to do the same with everyone else. Theresia hugged him tight and told him, “Be well, my son.” Allen fought back his tears.

He then went over to Mash, who was bawling his eyes out. “Mash, grow up strong and protect Myulla, okay?”

“Mm!”

Allen hugged his family tightly but did not cry. He had to uphold his pride as a big brother in front of his young siblings.

Allen then set off for the village gate with Rodin. The two did not speak along the way, but that was all right. When they reached the village square, they found two familiar faces waiting for them. The first was Dogora, the boy with a bumpkin face, and the other was Pelomas. They both approached Allen.

Dogora thrust a long object forward. “Hey, Allen. Take this.” He had quit calling Allen “Black Hair” a while ago.

“You sure I can have this?” Allen asked, accepting what he recognized to be a short sword.

This is the same one that I asked for the price of two years ago. It cost fifty silvers, if I remember right. I guess I never did get around to buying it.

Allen had really wanted this sword back when he spotted it in the weapons merchant’s shop. However, he had stopped himself, deciding to save the money for his family’s sake instead. The weapons merchant had told his son, Dogora, who had then accosted Allen as he was on his way back home. Apparently Dogora had still remembered from back then.

“Thank you, Dogora. I’ll take good care of it.”

“Well, that’s yours now. See ya!” Dogora said gruffly before dashing off as if to hide his embarrassment. Although he and Allen had only known each other for two years, there was no doubting their friendship. Allen slid the short sword into his belt, right next to his wooden sword.

Next, Pelomas and the other villagers also said their parting words. Apparently everyone in the residential area had heard about Allen leaving to serve the feudal lord. All their well-wishes filled Allen’s heart.

Rodin and Allen resumed walking. When the village gate came into view, Rodin, who had been silent this whole time, simply said, “Allen, this village is your home.”

“Yes, father.”

“I’m sure you’ll go on to do much greater things than simply being a manservant. Make sure you fulfill your obligations. Don’t worry about getting in contact with us until you do.”

In other words, Rodin was telling Allen not to worry about his family and to focus only on making the most out of this opportunity—after all, a former serf getting to serve a baron’s family right after becoming a commoner was unheard of.

“I’ll give it my all.”

After leaving those words behind, Allen parted ways with Rodin before the village gate. It was already time to set off, and so he boarded the carriage that someone pointed him toward. He looked out the window at the village where he had grown up. The familiar sight gradually receded as the carriage began its journey. Soon, Rodin’s figure was too small to make out. And eventually, the village itself faded from view. The tears Allen had been holding back burst forth, like water gushing from a broken dam.

In this way, Allen left behind Krena Village to start a new life in Granvelle City. After eight years as a serf, he had become a commoner and was accepted as a manservant in the service of Baron Granvelle, lord of the realm of Granvelle.

Side Story: Lakeside

Three days had passed since Baron Granvelle's procession—the one Allen was a part of—left Krena Village for Granvelle City.

A wrinkled old man bowed reverentially toward Captain Zenof. "Thank you so much for taking care of it right away, sir."

"Think nothing of it. Resolving the people's worries is part of our duties as knights of the realm."

Allen watched the exchange from a distance away. Aww, I guess I don't get to meet my grandparents after all.

They had stopped at the village where the founding settlers of Krena Village had originally come from. In other words, this was Rodin and Theresia's home village; their parents ought to still be living here. However, like all serfs, Allen's grandparents would be greatly limited in where they could go, and there was no reason for them to be at the village chief's house. Consequently, Allen had no chance to come across them.

Rodin had once told Allen that, because serfs almost never received permission to step outside their village, it was very common for those who moved to another village to never see their parents again.

I'll come back again someday when I can travel more freely, Allen thought to himself as he looked around for his own carriage. Of the many coaches in the procession heading back to Granvelle City, he had been riding in one that had been assigned specifically to the servants.

"You, the manservant over there. Come over."

Huh? Me?

Suddenly, a voice called out from above. When Allen looked up, he saw Cecil's face peeking through the window of a carriage adorned with House Granvelle colors.

"What can I do for you, Lady Cecil?"

"I need a conversational partner. Climb into my carriage."

Huh? I have nothing to talk with her about, though. Is she messing with me again?

"Of course, my lady. Right away."

Allen had already taken up service, despite having yet to reach the mansion; he felt uncomfortable doing nothing while on the road. Cecil, in turn, had started involving herself with his duties, both for better and for worse. She seemed to feel no qualms about it given how close they were in age.

While he was not eager to do so, Allen had no choice but to comply with a direct order from the daughter of a noble. Although there was little difference between commoners and serfs, he very much felt the distance in social status between nobility and himself.

Hm? Oh, this is a women-only carriage. Everyone inside is female...except for Vice-Captain Leibrand.

As it turned out, this carriage was for Cecil and the female servants who had come along on this trip. Aside from them, however, there was also Vice-Captain Leibrand in the seat in front. In all likelihood, he was here to protect Cecil should anything happen.

When Cecil gestured toward the seat across from hers, Allen took it wordlessly, wondering what he had done to deserve this torture. Riding in these carriages was itself draining, as they shook and rattled terribly. Allen could have done without the mental pressure of his current situation adding to the physical ordeal, but all he could do was sigh inside his mind.

Before long, the carriages of the procession started moving out. A sizable crowd saw them off.

Wow, did the entire village show up? Or is this just a portion, and their population is just that much bigger than Krena Village's?

"What do you think? Pretty big send-off, right?" Cecil asked suddenly, her eyes still directed outside the window at the receding crowd.

"As befits House Granvelle, the family who administers this land. This is surely a reflection of just how much the people appreciate everything you do for them."

"I know, right? Heh heh!"

I complimented you, so can you give me a cushion please?

Cecil, who was currently sitting on top of a stack of multiple cushions, smirked happily. Allen's praise of her family seemed to be exactly what she had been actually after.

"I thought this before at the great boar hunt, but you really are levelheaded, Allen. I can scarcely believe you were a serf before," Leibrand interjected, looking impressed with the answer that Allen had given. "I think you will do well in your new station as a manservant at the mansion, regardless of your origins."

"Your praise honors me, sir."

"See? That answer's plenty impressive too. How old are you now?"

"I turned eight this year."

Cecil started. "Huh? That's the same as me!"

"It appears so, my lady," Allen replied. I thought we were close—so we're the exact same age?

The fact did not really change much, but Cecil dove into her own thoughts, muttering, "So we're the same age" to herself, among other things.

The carriages then continued down the path lined sparsely with trees for several hours. The procession stopped for breaks every once in a while—Allen was ignorant of carriage travel and had no way to tell if the breaks were for young Cecil or for the horses. At each stop, Allen tried to move to a different carriage, but Cecil kept him chained to his seat with random stories about her family.

Okay, look, I'm not going to make notes about your "Oh, this always happens at home!" anecdotes in my grimoire!

As Allen continued to pretend he was listening with the occasional “Mm-hm,” “I see,” and “Ahh” in response to the girl’s utterly mundane ramblings, Cecil noticed something outside the window.

“Hold on, this area is… I think we’re close to the lake my mother told me about.”

“Lady Cecil, we will not be stopping there,” Vice-Captain Leibrand said bluntly.

“I didn’t say anything yet! And why not?!”

Hm? What’s this? We’re coming up on a lake?

Cecil tried to make her case. She had really wanted to watch the great boar hunt too, but her father refused because it was dangerous. Since she had so magnanimously backed down and had been such a good girl, she argued, this time her wish ought to be granted.

According to Cecil’s mother, very beautiful yellow flowers bloomed beside this lake. Cecil wanted to bring one of those flowers home.

“I’m sorry, my lady, but we cannot stop here. There have been reports of orcs wandering in this area, and Captain Zenof is off vanquishing them as we speak. Our highest priority is keeping you safe, my lady.”

After a short pause, Cecil said, “All right. I understand.” Having seen that Leibrand had no intention of changing his mind, she gave up her protest.

Orcs, huh. I’ve never seen one of those before, but they’ve gotta be strong, right? If I remember correctly, they’re Rank C monsters.

The only monsters that Allen had seen so far were great boars, albaherons, and horned rabbits. I’ve barely left home and I’m already hearing of more monsters. This really is a fantasy world of swords and magic.

However, orcs were a famous monster. Rodin had even mentioned them to Allen before. They would attack human settlements at times, and it was not entirely unheard of for them to wipe out an entire village.

“Do they really have to be killed?” Allen asked.

Leibrand nodded. “They do. Orcs are dangerous in that, if left alone, they would build their own settlements. For all we know, there might already be an orc village somewhere nearby.”

Earlier on, the chief of the village they just stopped at had come to Lord Granvelle and Captain Zenof with eyewitness reports of wandering orcs from traveling merchants passing through. Lord Granvelle had taken the news seriously and asked for a more accurate description of the location where the orcs had been spotted. Then he had dispatched Zenof, together with half of the knights who had originally planned to join the great boar hunts, to kill those orcs.

Because of this, the Granvelle family was now hurrying home with the strength of their entourage cut in half. Naturally, a detour to some lake was out of the question.

Orcs... I've heard that there's an Adventurer's Guild in Granvelle City. When I'm allowed to move around freely inside town, I definitely want to go check it out. Might even learn a few things about other monsters there.

Allen made notes about what he just heard about orcs in his grimoire and added a new entry under his to-do list. He was so occupied with planning what to do in the future that he failed to notice the brooding scowl that had come over Cecil's face.

□ □ □

Half a day passed, and the procession had now stopped for the night. On nights when there were no villages nearby, the group would camp out in the open, bringing the carriages around to encircle the camping ground as a makeshift barrier.

The following morning broke with an incident. One of the female servants cried out without warning, her face pale, "Lady Cecil is missing!"

"What?! That can't be! How did this happen?!" Lord Granvelle grabbed the woman and pressed her for details.

Apparently, when the servant had gone to call Cecil for breakfast, she had said she did not feel like breakfast and would wait in the carriage instead. The servant had left her to inform the baron, then had her own breakfast. When she returned to the carriage, however, Cecil was gone.

Allen stood up. "My lord, I believe chances are high that Lady Cecil has gone to the lake to pick some flowers. I strongly recommend going after her as soon as possible."

"Tell me more."

Since time was of the essence, Allen kept his explanation brief. He described how, during their carriage ride yesterday, Cecil had spoken of wanting to bring a flower home as a souvenir for her mother.

"Why did you not report this to me, Vice-Captain Leibrand?!"

"I-I am very sorry, my lord!"

"Forget it. Immediately set up a perimeter and search for her!"

The lake was directly west of the camp's location. As such, the knights split into three groups: one that headed west to the lake, and two that went north and south in case Cecil, who presumably did not know the exact location of the lake, wandered off course.

Allen approached Lord Granvelle. "My lord, please allow me to also search for Lady Cecil. I cannot merely turn a blind eye, not after having been involved with her care during this trip."

"Hm? Very well."

All right, I got permission.

Normally, an eight-year-old child requesting to go out into the wild to search for someone would be shot down on the spot. However, desperate times called for desperate measures—there were wandering orcs around, and Cecil had gone missing. The feudal lord almost reflexively agreed to Allen's request. Immediately after getting the go-ahead, Allen made a beeline for the lake.

I'm so glad I didn't change my card distribution yet!

Before leaving his village, Allen had said farewell to Krena with one final play knight session. In preparation for that match, he had adopted a build focused on Agility. Thanks to this, he was now capable of running at almost superhuman speeds. Soon enough, the sparse trees in his surroundings gave way to a wide, open field.

Okay, there's the lake. And those are probably the flowers Cecil was talking about. But she's not over there. Where is she, then?

Even though he had a clear, unobstructed view of the area, Allen did not see Cecil's figure anywhere. All he saw was an open meadow of yellow flowers in full bloom.

If only I could spot her footsteps... I did just run quite a bit. Did I overtake her, maybe?

Allen quickly concluded that it would be too difficult to find Cecil's small footprints within such a large area, so he decided to take a different approach. After picking three flowers and throwing them into Storage, he turned back.

If I'd known this would happen, I would've spent more time analyzing Hawkins's Ability beforehand.

There had been very limited opportunities for Allen to look into the Abilities of his Rank E and F Summons while he was living in Krena Village. Due to this, there was not much Allen felt he could do right now to contribute to the search. He knew that Bird E's was "Hawk Eye," and suspected it was meant for scouting purposes, but he had no idea how to actually use it.

He was now running back to the camp, taking a slightly different path just in case he actually had overtaken Cecil. He was just about to call forth a Bird E Summon anyway when he spotted a glimpse of cloth with a familiar design behind a large tree. It was the dress that Cecil had been wearing.

Found her!

Allen rushed over and found Cecil quivering violently. He reassured her, "It's all—"

"N-No!"

Huh? "No" what? What's goi— Wait, what's this smell?

A foul odor assaulted Allen's nose. He turned to see where it was coming from and noticed a humanoid figure sitting with its back against a tree a slight distance away.

Yep, that's an orc all right.

The creature had a pig-like face and was wearing a poor attempt at clothing made from animal hide. There was a giant spear on the ground close to its hand. The orc seemed to be deep in sleep at the moment.

All the pieces fell together in Allen's mind. Cecil had likely spotted the sleeping orc when she was on her way to the lake to pick a flower. She was so frightened that her knees gave way; she was now hiding and holding her breath, terrified of being discovered.

“Lady Cecil,” Allen murmured in a voice low enough only Cecil could hear.

“Wh-What?”

“Vice-Captain Leibrand and the knights will be along soon. Please get onto my back so I can bring you away from here.”

Fighting the orc myself is not an option. It’s a Rank C monster, and Cecil’s here.

The only monsters Allen had experience fighting and killing by himself were albaherons. This was an entirely new enemy, and fighting it using untested Summons was far too great a risk.

Allen crouched down, his back facing Cecil. She snaked her arms around his neck and grabbed on. He walked slowly and carefully, using the trees as shields before they finally got far enough away from the orc.

Cecil whispered into Allen’s ear, “Allen, I still want a flower. Mother said she really wanted to see one again.”

Allen picked up on the tremble in Cecil’s voice. Apparently she was quite serious about wanting a flower. He swallowed back the exasperated reply that was about to roll off his tongue, and instead wordlessly reached into Storage—at an angle out of Cecil’s sight, of course—to retrieve the three flowers that he had picked earlier.

“Lady Cecil, I already gathered three of them for you. Would these suffice?”

“What?! How did you...?! So these are the flowers mother wanted to see...”

Cecil slowly reached out for the three flowers and fell silent. Before long, the sound of hooves approached them. It turned out to be Vice-Captain Leibrand with several knights in tow.

Leibrand cried out, “Lady Cecil!”

“Lady Cecil is safe and sound,” Allen replied before pointing to the direction he had come from. “However, there is an orc a slight distance that way. It’s sleeping right now, but be careful.”

“Mm, understood.” Leibrand directed one of the knights to let Allen and Cecil onto his horse and to bring them back to the carriages. After that, he and the other knights went off to kill the orc.

The knights really are strong. I can’t even imagine how someone would go about fighting that monster. Even when sitting down, I could tell it was bigger than a normal human.

Before long, they were back in view of the carriages. The moment she dismounted the knight’s horse, Cecil dashed off to her father, the flowers clutched in her hand. Allen thought the baron could have been a bit stricter with his daughter, but the man simply looked relieved to see his daughter back safe and sound. He gave her his undivided attention as she excitedly started recounting everything that had happened.

Eventually, Leibrand and his subordinates returned. As they had originally gathered to hunt great boars, they naturally had no trouble taking care of a single orc.

The incident was finally over, and the procession resumed its journey toward Granvelle City. Cecil had ordered Allen to ride in her carriage for the remainder of the trip. She had grown even less reserved with him, talking at him nonstop until they reached the mansion. A small bud of worry blossomed in Allen’s heart as he thought about his fast approaching life as a manservant.

Afterword

Thank you so much for purchasing this book. This is the afterword. I was told that I can write about absolutely anything I want, so I'm thinking of sharing how I, Hamuo, decided to start uploading to the website Shosetsuka ni Naro.

I was an office worker three years ago who found himself with a ton of free time after getting home from work. Using that time, I consumed a very substantial number of manga on online platforms each month. I enjoyed a very wide variety of content, but this was around the time that the genres of reincarnation and otherworlds—colloquially referred to as "isekai series"—were really taking the digital publishing industry by storm. I got addicted to the genre and devoured every work using those themes that I could find.

In the middle of that phase of my life, I suddenly came across *Reincarnated as a Dragon Hatchling*, a work written by Necoco-sensei published by Earth Star Novel. I confess that I was drawn to the front cover and title and bought it thinking it was a manga. When I cracked it open and all the words inside leaped up at me, my first thought was, "Ack, I bought the wrong thing!" However, I did spend good money on it, mistake or no, so I decided to give it a read.

At the time, it had been a while since I'd read my last light novel. Specifically, it had been more than twenty years, if I remember correctly. And I was absolutely captivated from the very first page. It just completely blew me away. I remember losing myself and finishing the first volume in three hours, even though it was a pretty long book.

Then I bought and read the second volume, then the third. But then I came to a realization: There was no volume four.

Had it not been published? Did it get released with another publisher? Was it a physical-only release? I turned to the internet for information. And my search led me to Shosetsuka ni Naro. This was the first time I ever visited the site. And I read that fourth volume there.

After that, I could no longer return to waiting for e-book releases. Shosetsuka ni Naro was practically where I lived for the next year and a half. I spent hours and hours reading works on the site every single day. But eventually, I started struggling to find new series that suited my tastes.

I thought long and hard about what to do about it. The conclusion that I arrived at was to write my own series. Shosetsuka ni Naro was, at the end of the day, a place for amateur writers to publish whatever they wanted. I had read hundreds of works by that point. With the thoughts, "Maybe I can write one too?" and "Maybe I can make it too?" rattling around in my head, I finally started uploading my own work in spring 2019.

Since then, with much trial and error, I've uploaded two isekai series on Shosetsuka ni Naro. The second one was this book that you are now

reading: *Hell Mode*. And this is the story of how I began writing light novels.

The only reason why I took part in the Earth Star Award contest was because it was hosted by Earth Star Novel, the publisher that led me to start writing on Shosetsuka ni Naro. This publisher means a lot to me.

I want to end this afterword by expressing my heartfelt thanks for everyone who was involved with making this book happen. Thank you, Earth Star Novel, for even going so far as to make TV commercials promoting my book. Many thanks also to my editor, I-sama, who graciously took me through the process of publishing my very first book; Mo-sama, the illustrator who designed the look of the characters in the story; and Tamura Mutsumi-sama, the voice actress who breathed life into Allen by giving him a voice. My thanks knows no bounds.

Of course, I am also extremely grateful to my understanding and supportive colleagues at work, as well as to my parents, who gave birth to and raised me. Thank you so, *so* much.

I do hope to continue writing more stories in the future. Please continue supporting me!

I love Rodin
-Mo

DOGORA
KRENA
RODIN
ALLEN

Bonus Short Stories

Rainy Day

Like the world Kenichi was from, this world had four seasons. New buds sprouted in spring, temperatures soared in summer, crops ripened in autumn, and snow covered the land in winter. There was one thing, however, that Allen found different from his previous world: there was no rainy season here. Unlike in Japan, where it would rain a great deal for around one month every year, rain would fall anytime throughout the year in this world.

Oof, it's a total downpour today.

Allen looked outside from under the overhanging roof of his beat-up shack of a house. It was raining literal buckets. Water roared turbulently through the irrigation channel in front of the house, threatening to overflow. Because the house's roof was not entirely waterproof, rainwater leaked in from various places. The family had set out all their earthenware plates and jars to protect their most important possessions, but the leaks were so bad that the earthen-floored area was soaking wet.

That said, Allen had grown used to the rain and the leaks after living five years in this world. This scene did not invoke any sense of melancholy in him.

On rainy days, Rodin and Theresia also took it easy. If it was autumn or winter, Rodin would pass the time using a club to beat out the stalks harvested together with the grain to make straw for woven sandals. It was early summer now, however, so he had nothing to do at all.

After they finished lunch, Allen killed time messing around with the energetic Mash. Before long, play knight hour arrived.

"Alleeen, let's play!"

She still came, huh.

Krena cheerfully came in from the deluge outside, setting down a wooden board with a shaft stuck in the middle. This was a makeshift umbrella that Allen had come up with. Of course, it could not be folded and was overall very simple in design.

Allen had come to this world to enjoy the challenge of it, and had no interest in anything like "inventing" convenient items from his previous world and starting a financial enterprise. In the first place, it was extremely difficult for serfs to do business, as they did not have the freedom of choosing their occupations for themselves. So Allen only adopted a few simple things that could make his life slightly easier, like this pseudo-umbrella.

"Sure thing, Krena. Hmm, but what do you want to play? It's raining so hard and all."

"Hmm…"

It was still raining cats and dogs outside. Even Krena knew better than to suggest playing knight inside the house with everyone cooped up with them.

"In that case, Krena, wanna play Reversi?"

It's still too early for Mash, but Krena should be able to get it.

"River-see?" Krena repeated, her head tilted quizzically.

Allen gestured for her to wait in the large room, then ducked into the nursery and reappeared with a board in hand.

"Oh! You're bringing *that* out, are you?" Rodin looked up from playing with Mash, who had shifted his attention to his father when Allen got up.

"Yes, papa."

This family liked to pull out the Reversi board whenever they wanted to kill time. Allen had made it based on his memories from his previous life. It was literally just a board with grooves that marked out 8x8 squares. For the pieces, he had sliced up a tree branch of appropriate thickness and made simple marks on either face to differentiate between heads and tails.

Krena's interest was piqued. "How do you play this?"

"You put one of your pieces here."

"Like this?"

Allen proceeded to explain the rules while playing. Rodin and Mash also peered over with curiosity. Theresia was steaming a potato to serve Krena as a snack.

Kinda sucks that Reversi can only be played with two people. I made it first because it's easy to make, but I should probably make something that more people can play together. Playing cards…would probably be a pain. Maybe backgammon would be good.

"If you don't place a piece here, I'm gonna turn over all the pieces in this row."

"Ugh…"

The number of Krena's pieces steadily decreased as Allen started taking the corners. He wasn't aiming for an overwhelming victory, however, so he continued to give Krena hints as the game went on. Nevertheless, she still struggled.

As I'd feared, she's having a hard time. She does seem like the type who moves on intuition and feel, after all.

Allen did notice that when playing knight, Krena seemed to attack and shift position without really thinking about it. He had to use his head to come up with strategies and test things out, but she seemed to instinctively figure out how to deal with everything he threw at her.

Conversely, this talent did not translate well to the playing board. The two of them had been playing for over thirty minutes by now, but no matter what she did, Krena could not beat Allen.

The potato Theresia had prepared for Krena lay untouched next to her. Normally, she would have immediately said thanks and dug in with relish,

but the only thing on her mind right now was figuring out how to win. She brought her face close to the board, her brows furrowed with thought.

Rodin, who had been watching the whole time, commented wryly, “Yeah, she’s not gonna win.”

What?! Why’d you have to go and say it?! It’s not like you can beat me either!

Allen had also played against Rodin and Theresia before, but he had won handily almost every time. Even so, there was no need to actually put such things into words. Tears started welling up at the corner of Krena’s eyes. She was so frustrated that she even started to sniffle a little.

Oh, all right. I’ll think up a game more based on chance for next time. For today, I’ll go easy on you, Krena.

“H-Here!” Krena finally gained a corner and joyfully flipped a whole row of pieces.

“Aw, I lost,” Allen conceded.

“YAY!” Krena grabbed her potato and took a huge bite out of it, basking in the afterglow of victory.

“Wanna play one more round?”

“Sure!”

Playtime continued for quite a while longer in Allen’s house as rain continued to pour outside.

Pelomas the Merchant’s Ambitions

“I’m home,” Pelomas announced as he came tottering in with unsteady steps.

Deboji, who happened to be nearby as Pelomas headed to the kitchen to grab water, responded, “Oh? Welcome back.”

“Thank you, father.”

“So, how’s it going? You getting along well with the Sword Lord?”

“It’s all right.”

“What? It’s only ‘all right’? You know you can invite her to our house anytime, right? Just like for New Year’s.”

“I know, father.”

Every day since the Appraisal Ceremony that revealed the birth of a Sword Lord in his village, Deboji had told his son to get along with her. Her future was very likely to be bright and distinguished, if Sword Lord Dverg’s serf-to-noble tale was anything to go by. Forging a relationship with Krena now could lead to opportunities in the future. It was with such ulterior motives in mind that Pelomas had reluctantly accepted the invitation from his friend, Dogora, to join the play knight sessions at Krena’s house.

Honestly, Pelomas thought Krena’s movements during the play sessions were entirely superhuman. He could tell despite knowing nothing about the sword. Allen, who had been playing with her for several years before Dogora had joined in, was equally monstrous.

The group's members were, from strongest to weakest, Krena, Allen, Dogora, Pelomas, then Mash, with a huge gulf between Allen and Dogora. Pelomas was not particularly interested in closing that gulf, having never been particularly athletic in the first place. He mainly spent these sessions sparring with Mash.

"Also—"

"I know, I know, father. You don't have to tell me again. But come to think of it, I'm going to the royal capital, not the Academy. We might not even meet again in the future."

"That's a fair point. But that's all the more reason to get close to her now."

As Pelomas was a Merchant by Talent, he would be studying at a commercial school run by the Merchant's Guild located in the kingdom's capital rather than go to Academy City with Krena. Just like the Academy, this commercial school was a three-year program for children aged twelve to fifteen. After graduating, alumni were expected to apprentice at stores, eventually becoming full-time employees or going independent. Pelomas had heard of this career path from his father after learning of his Talent at his Appraisal Ceremony, and this was the direction in life he was striving toward. This did mean, however, that his life would take a very different turn from Krena's a few years down the line.

"Who knows? You might open a store in the capital one day, and you can't have too many connections with nobles when you do. I won't go so far as to tell you to *marry* Krena, but you should treasure the relationships you have."

"O-Okay…"

Pelomas could not imagine Krena getting married to anyone. If she really had to, maybe Allen would be a good match.

□ □ □

After finishing dinner, Pelomas returned to his room. He pulled back his floor carpet, lifted a loose floorboard, and took out a few sheets of parchment, spreading them out on his table.

"I really *am* lucky. I still can't believe everything I have here. Heh heh heh…"

He was looking at design sketches and instructions for Reversi and dice games that Allen had come up with.

"Allen's such a mystery. Where does he even get these ideas from?" Pelomas muttered to himself, the corners of his mouth naturally lifting into a grin.

During a recent play knight session, it had started pouring without warning. As there was no way they could continue, all the children had ducked inside Krena's house, where it turned out she had multiple strange games stored away. When asked, she revealed that everything had been made by Allen.

Pelomas had never heard of any of them in Granvelle City nor the royal capital, but decided to try playing them anyway. To his shock, he found them quite fun and their designs extremely well-polished. The uncomplicated rules made it easy for anyone to join in, and the game pieces themselves were very simple to make.

“These are games that only exist in this villa— no, only in Krena’s house. Allen really is amazing for coming up with things like these.”

Pelomas had been able to tell right away how lucrative these ideas were. On the parchment before him were his notes for products that he wanted to create and sell once he grew old enough to start his own business.

Earlier that day, he had heard of a game involving cards made from wooden plaques. He was now writing all the details down before he forgot them, relying on the feeble light of a single candle.

The great ambitions of Pelomas the Merchant had only just begun.

Krena and Chores

It was now nearing the end of autumn, just when the temperature was starting to get nippy. After Rodin got hurt, Allen had started helping out with chores around the house.

I’ve finished harvesting all the potatoes, but there are still a lot of things to do.

In addition to the usual chores, such as drawing water from the well in the morning, doing the laundry, and helping Theresia cook meals, Allen also had to sort out the harvested potatoes. On top of all that—though this was not technically a chore—the albaherons he caught also needed to be bled and butchered. He had left his mother Theresia to nurse Rodin, who was still largely bedridden, and take care of young Mash.

This morning, Allen had, as usual, drawn water and hunted a few albaherons. He was now washing his family’s laundry. There was quite a lot of it, what with there being four people.

All right, this should be enough. I’ll have to butcher the albaherons next.

Allen pulled all the laundry from the large bucket he washed it in and hung it up on a clothesline in the yard, moving with practiced, flowing motions like a gamer completing his daily quests. By now, the carcasses on the bleeding rack had already finished draining and were ready to be processed.

□ □ □

In the afternoon, Krena came to Allen’s house as she always did.

“Alleeeen! Let’s play! Huh? Where’s Allen?”

“Oh hi, Krena dear. Allen is out in the yard.”

Krena thanked Theresia and ducked back out of the house. She looked around and found Allen among the piles of potatoes.

“Oh, hey there. Please give me a few more minutes.”

“What are you doing, Allen?”

“I’m separating out the seed potatoes and the potatoes we’re giving the village chief.”

Sixty percent of the harvest had to be yielded to the village chief as tax. Allen was currently picking through potatoes roughly the size of Japanese sweet potatoes and placing them into the various baskets laid out in front of him.

Krena, who already knew that Allen was helping his family out, sat down next to him and placed her wooden sword on the ground. “Allen, what should I do?”

“Aw, you’ll help? Thank you. Then can you help me pick out the seed potatoes? Find the ones around this size and fill this basket with them.”

Apparently Krena was willing to forgo playing knight today. She meekly did what Allen asked.

“Allen is always helpful. Papa and mama said so.”

“Hm? Well, I do the things I do because this is my family.”

A while after sharing what Gerda and Mathilda had said, Krena finished filling up her basket.

“Allen, it’s full.”

“Thank you. Can you bring your basket over there?”

“Sure!”

Krena got up and lifted the basket.

“Wait, it’s heavy, right? Are you okay?” Allen asked in alarm as he saw her walk off with wobbly steps.

“I-I’m okay,” Krena called back. However, although she had talent with the sword, her strength was only equal to other children her age. What’s more, the basket obscured her view.

“Wait, you’re heading into the laun—”

“WAHHH!”

Krena forcefully crashed into the support for the clothesline, bringing everything down. The laundry, which was still wet, became covered with dirt as the potatoes scattered all over. The sight of the chaos spread before her eyes left Krena at her wits’ end.

Allen rushed over, checking her for injuries. “You okay?! Are you hurt anywhere?!”

“I’m sorry, Allen. I wanted to help, but I only made a big mess.” The usually bright and cheerful Krena seemed on the verge of tears.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Allen said, giving her head a few pats.

“A-Allen…?”

“Can you gather the potatoes and put them back into the basket? I’ll get the laundry-washing bucket out.”

“O-Okay…”

Allen proceeded to gather the dirtied laundry as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Krena gathered the potatoes, sniffling a little.

When the preparations for washing the laundry again were ready, Allen beckoned Krena to join him in the bucket. “Krena, take off your shoes and come in. But be careful, the water’s a little cold.”

Krena kicked off her sandals and accepted Allen’s outstretched arm. “Wah!” she exclaimed in wonder at the experience of stepping into a water-filled laundry bucket.

“We do this. See? We stomp on the clothes.”

“Like this?”

“That’s right! You’re doing great, Krena.”

The two kids began stomping the dirt off the laundry, soon forgetting the chill of the water.

“Allen really is amazing.”

“What do you mean?”

“’Cuz you can do everything!”

“Oh, that’s not true. Thank you for helping me today. Let’s play knight tomorrow!”

“Sure!”

Krena flashed Allen the biggest smile she had that day as she energetically tread on the clothes in the bucket with him.

Chasing a Horned Rabbit

On a certain day near the end of summer, after finishing his morning chores, Allen was now playing knight with Krena. Their wooden swords clashed again and again in loud clacks as Mash watched on from inside the house.

Today, as always, Allen was on the losing end. With Krena’s Sword Mastery improving a hundred times faster than his own, he always struggled to seize the initiative in these matches. He kept coming up with new strategies, but it never took long for Krena to find a way to cope.

“An opening!”

“Whoa!”

Allen’s sword was knocked out of his hands. It flew into the corner of the yard, spinning several times in mid-air.

“Sir Allen! Will you continue?!” Krena asked, beaming with an ear-to-ear grin as if celebrating her very first victory—even though she basically won every time.

“I surrender, Sir Krena,” Allen replied wryly, lifting both hands in a sign of submission. “I’m gonna pick my sword back up.”

“Okay!”

When Allen approached the overgrown grass in the corner of his yard, however, he heard a rustling sound.

“Hm?”

Something was in the grass.

Sniffle. Sniffle.

“Allen? What’s wrong?”

“There’s something here, Krena!”

It turned out to be a rabbit as big as a medium-sized dog with a horn on its forehead. As soon as it noticed Allen’s approach, it charged at him. Thankfully, as he had his cards arranged in preparation for playing knight with Krena, he managed to evade the attack.

“Are you okay, Allen?”

“I-I’m fi— Krena, watch out! The horned rabbit is heading for you!”

The warning from Allen prompted Krena to instinctively lift her wooden sword up in readiness for battle.

“Come! I am Sir Krena!”

However, the rabbit that was rushing toward Krena seemed to falter in the face of the pressure that Krena was emanating and instead took a sharp right, bounding out of the yard.

“It’s getting away. Krena, let’s catch it!”

Horned rabbits were known for being delicious. Neither Allen nor Krena had caught one before, and since this one had appeared to them, they decided to give chase. Allen grabbed his wooden sword and rushed out with Krena. However, the beast was fast, and it soon dove into the fallow field on Allen’s family’s land where the grass grew taller than even Allen and Krena themselves.

“Krena, let’s split up. If you see it, give me a shout!”

“Okay!”

The two children followed the rabbit into the grass, wooden swords in hand. But then thirty minutes passed with nothing to show for it. For all they knew, the monster might have left the fallow field as soon as they themselves went in.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

Before they knew it, it was now time for Krena to head home.

“It’s a pity, but I guess it got away. If we see it again, let’s catch it then!”

“Okay!”

The best outcome would be if they had caught the horned rabbit, but the two children were not all that down about their failure. Krena said goodbye to Allen and then energetically ran home.

“Welcome back, Krena.”

“Daa!”

“Mama, Lily, I’m back.”

When she returned home, Krena was greeted by her mother Mathilda and Lily, her baby sister. It would be a while yet before Lily could speak, but now that she could totter around on her own, she always glued herself to Krena.

Krena was playing with Lily for a while before a large, bear-like man lumbered into the house and said in a loud voice, “I’m back!”

“Welcome back, hun,” Mathilda replied. “You seem happy. What happened?”

The man was none other than Gerda, Krena's father. Because Lily was still young and required Mathilda's constant attention, he tended to the family's fields by himself.

"Look at…*this*! It's been a while since I caught one!" Gerda crowed proudly, suddenly thrusting forward what he had been holding behind his back this whole time. It turned out to be a horned rabbit carcass.

"WOW! Papa's so amazing!"

"Waaaahhhh!"

"Aw, hun, you've gone and made Lily cry!"

"OW!!!"

Krena looked super impressed seeing her father with a horned rabbit, the exact same creature she herself had failed to catch earlier. However, because he had been hiding it behind his back and had shown it very suddenly, Lily had gotten so surprised she burst into tears. His thoughtless gesture earned Gerda a punch to the face that sent him flying out the front door.

"But honestly, this *is* a great help, especially with the great boar hunts still a ways off," Mathilda conceded.

"Well, there you go."

Unlike the autumn, when meat would be much more accessible thanks to the hunts going on, this horned rabbit was a rare and much-needed source of protein for the two growing children.

Krena chimed in. "Allen will be happy too!" Apparently, sharing this windfall with her friend was a given in her mind.

"Mm, that's right, they did share with us last time."

Normally, horned rabbits could only be found outside the village in the wild. Only every once in a while would one manage to slip through the surrounding wall and get inside, so horned rabbit meat was considered a rare treat. Last time, Rodin had caught one and shared it with Gerda and his family.

"Good girl," Gerda said as he rubbed Krena's head gently. He was praising her for being willing to share her precious food with a friend.

"Mm-hm, I am a good girl!"

"Well, it looks like tomorrow night is gonna be a sleepover. Since Lily is still little, how 'bout we call Allen's family over here."

"YAAAY!!!"

Mathilda smiled warmly at the exchange between father and daughter.

The Resolve of a Butcher

"I'm back."

"Welcome ba— What's with that look on your face? Did something happen?"

When the man who had gone out to draw water for the family got home, his wife immediately noticed his weird demeanor. Including the baby the wife was still pregnant with, this was a four-member family of serfs.

“Rodin’s son asked me for something. I’ll be heading over to his place after breakfast.”

“Huh? Isn’t his son still really young? Why’re you going all the way over there for a kid?”

“Not sure, but it shouldn’t take long. I’ll be back soon to go buy our firewood.”

“Please do. Winter’s getting closer by the day.”

The man enjoyed a breakfast of the usual meager fare of steamed potatoes with his wife and child, then made his way over to Rodin’s house. The first thing he noticed when he got near was the smell of blood. When he reached the front gate, he gasped as he found himself face-to-face with a large albaheron that was being bled.

“It’s an albaheron,” the man murmured in shock. “Why’s there a monster carcass here?”

Before the man could gather his thoughts, however, Allen approached him. The boy thanked him for coming as promised. For some reason, the man found himself naturally adopting a respectful tone, even though he was speaking to a mere seven-year-old. Perhaps it was the bizarreness of the situation. Perhaps it was because he was sure that the boy possessed something different, something mysterious about him. After Rodan got seriously injured in last year’s great boar hunt, the man had seen Allen nonchalantly carrying heavy water buckets on multiple occasions. What was more, there were many eyewitness accounts of Allen easily shouldering loads of firewood that any normal adult would have struggled to lift.

As it turned out, Allen wanted the man to help butcher his albaherons. The reward for this task was two blocks of meat per bird, the equivalent of eight days’ worth of firewood. The man asked why there were albaherons to begin with, but Allen only said he had defeated them when they came down. That was obviously not the full story, but the man decided not to press the matter to avoid jeopardizing this opportunity for his own family’s sake.

This man was one of those who joined in on the butchering whenever great boars were brought back to the village. He was not directly part of the hunts like Rodin and Gerda were. Consequently, the amount of great boar meat that he received afterward was only a fraction of the hunters’ share. That had been fine so far, but his child was growing bigger and needed more nutrition. He had a second child on the way as well. His family needed more meat now than it ever had before.

“Have you ever butchered a bird before?”

“Nope, but I think I’ll manage if it’s just dressing the meat.”

“Really?! Can you teach me? My father showed me before, but he was too busy to do it properly.”

“Of course. You start by going—”

So the carving up of the first albaheron began, with the man explaining what he was doing and Allen listening attentively.

“So, you do this here?”

“That’s right. And for the wings, this is where you’d want to separate them.”

“Your explanation is even clearer than my father’s!”

The man thought Allen to be a very fast learner. Additionally, he came to a realization upon seeing the child at work.

“So, you’ve already overcome a Trial of the Gods. That’s incredible for someone of your age, Allen. And I guess this is the reason behind how you’re able to carry so much water?”

While he was butchering, Allen displayed a strength far beyond that of any child his age. The man realized the process of killing all the albaherons currently waiting to be processed had helped Allen overcome a Trial of the Gods.

“Hm? Pretty much, yes. But mister, you must have overcome one or two yourself, haven’t you? Even though I don’t remember seeing you at the hunts.”

Allen, in turn, had also noticed that the man was stronger than most others. The difference was so remarkable that it could only be explained by him having leveled up a few times.

“Mm, I don’t go hunting anymore.”

“‘Anymore’? So that means you’ve gone before? Why’d you stop?”

The conversation continued strong as the two continued their butchering work.

“Well…a friend of mine got hurt during my first hunt. So then my wife forbade me from ever going again.”

“I see. Well, it’s a lot safer now than before. If you’ve already overcome a Trial before, it’d be a waste to not try going again.”

“You think so?”

Because the man seemed interested, Allen described the current hunting experience to him. Currently, there was a system in place for those without experience to stand at the back and simply thrust at the boars using long spears. In order to stand on the frontlines, one would need approval from either Rodin or Gerda. And of course, if someone was fast on their feet, they could join Pekej and help pull targets toward the rest of the party.

“Butchers get three blocks of meat, right? Those who hold long spears get five, whereas those using short spears or in the pulling group each get ten.”

“Wow, that’s really different from how things were back in my day…”

The man’s heart was wavering. Actually, what he had said about a friend getting hurt was a lie. The truth was there were several founding serfs he knew who had died, with each successive hunt claiming more lives. Almost all of them had been newcomers with zero experience. Even serfs understood the concept that those who had yet to overcome Trials of the Gods died more easily. But Allen was now saying there was a safe and sure way to help such newcomers overcome their first few Trials.

After this, half a day passed. Because of how big albaherons were, the man only managed to butcher three of them. However, at six blocks of meat and half a liver, the reward he received from Allen was already more than what he normally received from helping butcher one great boar. He promptly returned home.

"What took so lo— Wait, what's with all that?" His wife was about to express her displeasure at his delayed return when she noticed the tied-up blocks of meat in her husband's hands.

"I got these from Rodin's son."

While eating lunch, the man shared everything that had happened this morning. Because the liver would go bad quickly, they were already eating it. This portion of the organ seemed nearly the size of a block of meat in and of itself. The man looked between his son, who was currently doing his best to eat the boiled liver despite it being hot, and his wife's bulging stomach.

"What a strange child he is," the man's wife marveled. "How did he even manage to catch that many albaherons?"

"Well, I'm sure—" The man found himself holding his tongue. He was sure that the gods were involved in Allen's life in some capacity, but such things were often best left unsaid.

"What's the matter?"

"Honey…I'm thinking of taking up my spear again."

"What?! Huh?! But what about the coming baby?!"

"I want to do it. For yours and the baby's sake."

The man looked straight into his wife's eyes as he roughly tousled his son's hair.

Krena Village After Allen's Departure

It was a day not long after Allen had left Krena Village with Baron Granvelle. The year had not yet turned, and it was still deep in winter, with the temperature being so chilly that all the villagers struggled to get out of bed in the morning without the warmth of a lit fireplace. Right now, Deboji was in the middle of examining the goods that he would be selling to the traveling merchant who would be arriving today.

"Looks like business is great again this year, huh?" the merchant in question commented as he strode into the room, guided here by one of Deboji's hired help.

"Ah, there you are. Well, it's as you see. I have the villagers to thank for this."

This merchant had been making the trip between faraway Granvelle City to this remote village for several years now. For a frontier village in the middle of nowhere, the presence of traveling merchants like him was of vital importance. This specific merchant visited once every few months, and today was one such day.

Ever since Deboji learned that his son, Pelomas, had the Talent of a Merchant, he had been making the boy sit in attendance whenever he did

business, hoping that these experiences might come in handy for him one day when he grew up.

“Wow! Albaheron wings again this year! And these boxes are the feathers?”

“Yes they are.”

Albaherons, which flew high up in the sky above not only Krena Village but the entire Granvelle fiefdom, could only be caught in the rare moments they descended. Because of this, the merchant’s eyes had immediately shot to the pile of wings. He went straight over to examine their quality, rejoicing at seeing them for the third year in a row.

“Your village is producing more and more of them every year!” he exclaimed while thinking about where to sell the wings. “How do you even catch this many of them anyway? Right, what about the meat? Would you sell me the meat too?”

“I told you last year that the meat is not available. And since we’re on the topic…”

The meat was not available because it had not been collected as tax. Whenever Deboji thought back to the time the first albaheron had been caught, he could not help but think to himself, “He sure got me good.”

The child known as Allen had been aware of just how many albaherons he could catch. Deboji only found out at the end of that year. To his surprise, the amount of materials submitted as tax indicated that Allen had bagged more than ten albaherons. The rumor among the serfs about a young boy hunting a large number of albaherons never made it to Deboji’s ear until after the fact.

“‘Since we’re on the topic’…what?”

“This is the last batch of albaherons. There won’t be any more next year. So I’ll be charging you a premium for everything here today.”

“Huh?! What does that mean? But you’ve managed to produce them three years in a row. Come on, don’t pull my leg.”

However, the village chief confirmed that there would be no more albaheron wings next year. Consequently, he was pricing this year’s batch twenty percent higher than last year’s. As he was saying this, he sent Pelomas a look, indicating that his son should be paying attention.

It was Deboji’s obligation as village chief to wrangle out as much profit as possible. He was basically trading on behalf of the whole village, after all. Of course, sixty percent of whatever he negotiated would go to the feudal lord as tax. However, the higher the price he set, the greater the remaining forty percent would be. The more money that entered the village’s coffers, the more the village could be developed.

Allen had been gone a while now, but what he had achieved while here was great, and their effects were felt strongly even now. Deboji sincerely thought that those achievements had saved Krena Village.

“All right, all right. We’ve been trading partners for a long time now. I’ll take you at your word. So then, this here’s the register of what I’ve brought this time.”

Deboji accepted the parchment being proffered and scanned through it. “Hmm, can you bring more wine and fruit starting next time?”

“I mean, fruit I can do, but I can’t increase how much wine I sell you without His Lordship’s permission.”

The sale of wine was strictly regulated, as it negatively affected public order. Many feudal lords only allowed it to be traded on an as-needed basis in their realms. The amount that the village chief was indicating to the merchant definitely required express permission.

“Look at this,” Deboji said, holding out a piece of parchment. “A permit from His Lordship.”

“Whoa! Come on, you shoulda told me earlier! Thank you for the business!” the merchant exclaimed, looking even more delighted than when he saw the albaheron wings. Selling wine was a lucrative business. And now that Krena Village had a permit, he could sell them more—not just next time, but in all the years to come too.

After the feudal lord headed home from his visit, he had sent the permit to Krena Village through an envoy. When Deboji asked the envoy for the reason behind the permit, the man had told him it was requested by “someone named Allen” out of consideration for the villagers who put their lives on the line hunting great boars.

“Oh, and here’s the other permit we received. Next time you come, we’ll have leather products to sell. I hope you buy them at a good price.”

“Anoth— Leather? Ah, from great boars?”

“That’s right. His Lordship is sending us a leatherworker soon.”

This past year, the leatherworker in the neighboring village had been called over to make armor and shields for the great boar hunting party. However, that had been a short-term arrangement. When he finished, he had returned home.

To that end, the feudal lord had promised to dispatch a leatherworker from Granvelle City and have him open a shop in Krena Village. He would be expected to hire apprentices from among the village’s children and establish its leatherwork industry.

For a village, gaining a whole new industry was huge. Thanks to the second permit, instead of sending great boar hides straight to Granvelle City, Krena Village would be able to make a profit from manufactured leather products and turn in a portion of that profit as tax instead.

“Deboji, what did you *do*? C’mon, we go way back. You can tell me,” the merchant said teasingly as he continued staring at the permit in his hands. It gave permission for trading leather products made from twenty great boars each year. This was such a generous sanction that he could not help but jokingly ask if there had been foul play involved.

“Hey, don’t go smearing my good name. I told you already at the start.”

“Hm? What’d you tell me?”

“I have the villagers to thank for this. Although one’s left.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Nah, I was just talking to myself.”

Deboji then began his negotiations with the merchant. In this way, Krena Village continued to prosper even after Allen’s departure.

Allen’s Departure and Krena’s Growth

On a certain day quite a while after Allen’s departure, Gerda found himself standing awkwardly, his two-meter-long boar-hunting spear in hand. He shot his wife, Mathilda, a quick look as if asking for help, but she simply sighed and shook her head.

The pink-haired girl before him shouted once again, “I want to join the boar hunt too!”

This was, of course, Krena, his daughter. Her voice carried loud and clear throughout this small house.

“No.”

“Why?! Allen got to go so many times!”

“As I told you, he was only observing.”

This was not the first time this exchange had taken place since Allen’s departure. However, whereas Krena had always eventually backed off—albeit reluctantly—before, she seemed resolute this time. She was standing in the doorway of the house, seemingly unwilling to budge until she got her “yes.”

During her parting match with Allen, Krena had realized she had not been able to see Allen’s sword at all. Conversely, Allen had seen her sword just fine, judging by how he had evaded and parried all her attacks with the slightest of movements. In fact, he had seemed so composed it was as if he could have won even if blindfolded. In other words, Allen had been going easy on her the entire time and allowing her to win.

Krena loved swinging her sword. She loved fighting strong opponents. When she realized that Allen had been holding back, an overwhelming urge to get faster and stronger seized her from within. This was why she wanted to participate in the great boar hunts at all costs. She had yet to overcome a single Trial of the Gods, and she knew that hunting monsters was the key to getting stronger. Allen had told her so.

“Definitely no,” Gerda repeated.

“Wh—?!”

Krena’s protest was cut short by Gerda’s bear hug.

“When you turn ten, I’ll let you hold a spear. Please be patient until then. Allen also promised he wouldn’t hold a spear until he turns ten. Can you also promise me the same thing?” Gerda asked, trying very hard to convey his earnestness to Krena through his hug.

After a short pause, Krena said, “Okay, I promise.” She had received Gerda’s feelings loud and clear, and there were tears welling up in her eyes.

However, she desperately held them back. If Allen did not cry when leaving the village, she could not let herself cry either.

Gerda almost seemed to fling himself away as he grabbed his spear and headed out. After that, Krena spent the rest of the morning looking after Lily.

□□□

In the afternoon, guests arrived.

“Hey, Krena! We’re here!”

“Dogora! Pelomas! Welcome!”

The two boys had come to play knight. They looked around as if looking for someone.

“Is Mash not coming today either?”

Ever since Allen had left, his younger brother, Mash, had stopped coming to these play knight sessions.

“Uh-uh, he didn’t come.”

Dogora sighed. “He’s so different from Allen, even though they’re brothers.”

“Let’s play knight at Mash’s house today!” Krena suddenly shouted, her grip tightening on her wooden sword.

“Hey, that’s a great idea. I hope he’s not still moping around.”

And with that, Krena, Dogora, and Pelomas all headed to Mash’s house. Lily, who was now four and therefore had permission to leave the house if accompanied, wanted to go along. So with Krena holding her sister’s hand, the group cut through the fields, traversing the raised footpaths.

As soon as they arrived, Krena immediately threw the front door open and shouted, “Mash, let’s play knight!”

Theresia looked up and smiled, immediately catching on. “Thank you for coming to play with Mash. That’s really sweet of you!” She understood that the group of children had come because Mash had stopped going to join the play knight sessions after Allen left.

Krena continued making her way into the house and quickly found Mash in the nursery. Their eyes met.

“K-Krena…?”

“Why are you not coming, Mash? Does your tummy hurt?”

In Krena’s mind, having a stomachache was apparently the only valid reason for not playing knight. Her question invoked a wry smile from Pelomas, who otherwise remained quiet.

“N-No I don’t... But because Allen is gone…”

Even now, Mash seemed on the verge of tears. Unlike Myulla, who was still too young, Mash had gotten very attached to Allen.

“Take up your weapon!” Krena ordered in her knight voice, pointing at the spear-like stick propped up in the corner of the room.

“Huh?”

“Allen wants you to be strong, right?”

“He…does?”

“Yep! He told you to protect Myulla!”

Krena had been there when Allen bid Mash farewell. She knew full well what it was that he had wanted to entrust his younger brother with.

Mash stared at his weapon as he thought back to what Allen had said.

“So, let’s get strong! Take up your weapon!” Krena said one more time.

Mash wiped his tears away with his sleeve and stood up. “Okay!”

From that day onwards, the play knight sessions took place at Mash’s house. The time that had stopped due to Allen’s departure was starting to move once again.

The Legend of Sword Lord Dverg ~Childhood~

Allen’s birth country had a hero known to all as Dverg the Sword Lord. This story is an episode from a few decades ago, back when Dverg, who had been born a serf, was still a child.

“Mother, you’re supposed to take it easy. Don’t get up.”

“I’m so sorry for always leaving you to do everything.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just rest.”

This dilapidated shack was occupied by Dverg and his mother alone. His father had been attacked by monsters and had died several years ago. After that, his mother had pushed herself too hard while raising him on her own and had become bedridden. Now, Dverg was working to support the both of them in spite of his young age.

A serf’s day started early. Dverg would get up at the crack of dawn and head out to the fields. At the time of this story, no one—including himself—knew about him being a Sword Lord. Unlike the age Allen was born into, back during this time, the Appraisal Ceremony was not widely available for everyone.

It was true that Dverg worked in the fields, but his job was more that of an assistant. In the first place, the fields that he worked were neither his nor his mother’s, but their neighbor’s. When his mother had fallen ill, the village chief had confiscated her lands, determining it impossible for a single child to do everything involved with maintaining farmland. Serfs did not own the land they tended, so there was no way for Dverg or his mother to protest the village chief’s decision. Currently, Dverg had a deal with his neighbor who would reward his labor with food.

Dverg was in the middle of a task when a voice suddenly bellowed at him. “Hey! There are weeds here too!”

It was a boy his own age, the son of the man who Dverg was working for. This boy would come over to mess with Dverg every once in a while.

“Okay,” Dverg replied simply before going over to weed the indicated area. He refused to make eye contact and remained silent.

Just as the boy, who was irked at Dverg’s lack of a response, was about to escalate things, his father showed up and said, “Don’t bother him when he’s working. Take care of your own tasks.”

The boy backed off reluctantly with the reprimand. After watching him leave, the man turned toward Dverg and said, “Forget the weeding. I have an errand for you to run.” He handed over a basket, rather large for a child, and told him to exchange the wheat inside for molmo fruits.

All Dverg said was “Yes, sir” before he then turned to head toward the village marketplace, cutting through the fields using the raised footpaths.

Along the way, he bumped into a young girl his age.

“Oh hey, it’s Dverg! Are you on an errand?”

This girl’s name was Clasys. She was the same person who would eventually go on to become Clasys the Saintess. As it happened, Dverg the Sword Lord and Clasys the Saintess had come from the same village.

“Clasys.” That was all Dverg said before walking past her, not bothering to answer her question.

“Huh? What was that? Wait a moment!” Clasys circled around to stand in Dverg’s way.

“What?”

“Where’re you go— Oh, the marketplace, right? In that case, I’m coming with you.”

Dverg walked on, as if wordlessly saying, “Do whatever you want.” Clasys took it as unspoken acceptance and walked beside him with light steps. When they arrived at the marketplace, they parted for a while, with Clasys heading off as Dverg made a beeline for the greengrocer.

“Please exchange all this wheat for molmo.”

The greengrocer shot the shabbily dressed boy a glance before wordlessly proceeding with the trade. When the grocer was finished, Dverg shouldered the basket again and turned around to head back. To his surprise, however, he found Clasys right in front of him, apparently already done with her own shopping.

“Well, let’s go!” Clasys said cheerfully, whirling around to face the road. Unfortunately, she happened to bump into a rough-looking man who had been walking by with a swagger.

“Ah!” she cried as she was sent flying from the collision.

“The fuck? Look where you’re goin’, brat.”

Dverg’s eyes narrowed at the sight of a full-grown man—who was likely one of the hoodlums in the village, based on his getup—hurling abuse at a little girl who was not even ten years old after making her fall down. Before he could do anything else, Dverg wordlessly walked up and positioned himself in between the two, his basket still on his back.

“Huh? The fuck you lookin’ at, kid?!”

The hoodlum flew into a rage from Dverg’s silent glare. He drew the wooden sword on his waist and swung it right at Dverg’s face. A dull smack rang out, drawing the attention of everyone in the marketplace. However, no one stepped up to intervene.

Seeing how Dverg had not backed up even one step from the blow and was still glaring prompted the hoodlum to swing his wooden sword again, this time using all his strength.

At the same moment, Clasys got up and jumped between the two, screaming, “Please stop it!” She kept her eyes tightly closed, waiting for the blow to fall. However, it never did.

“Th-The fuck are you doin’?!”

When Clasys opened her eyes, she saw Dverg holding the hoodlum’s sword with a single hand. The man tried to pull his weapon free, but Dverg remained so firm it was as if he had planted roots into the ground. Just as the man gave it another tug, his face entirely red, Dverg let go, causing him to stumble many steps backwards and fall hard on his rear.

The hoodlum quickly got up and ran away, his face burning from the shame of losing in a bit of tug-of-war to a child in view of so many eyes.

“Are you okay, Dverg?” Clasys asked as she put her hand over Dverg’s cheek. “Heal.”

“Hm? Mm, thank you.” Although he hadn’t even been hurt in the first place, Dverg still thanked Clasys for the healing. He had actually overcome multiple Trials of the Gods already and was much more powerful than any run-of-the-mill hoodlum.

The two youngsters walked off the way they had come, paying no mind to the stares from everyone in the marketplace.

“You’ve gotten better at using Healing Magic.”

“Aww, thanks. Everyone at the church is really good at teaching. I’m working hard so I can heal your mother one day.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank *you* too.”

Dverg walked a little slower, matching his stride with Clasys’s.

The story of how these two defeated a red dragon and shocked the entire kingdom was still a ways off in the future.

Table of Contents

Cover

Prologue

Chapter 1: I Reincarnated as a Serf

Chapter 2: First Summon

Chapter 3: Krena and Playing Knight

Chapter 4: The Appraisal Ceremony

Chapter 5: Krena vs. Vice-Captain of the Knights

Chapter 6: Incident

Chapter 7: Allen’s Resolve

Chapter 8: Hunting Albaherons

Chapter 9: Dogora, Son of the Weapons Merchant

Chapter 10: Great Boar Hunting

Chapter 11: Rank E Summons

Chapter 12: The Feudal Lord’s Visit

Chapter 13: Setting Off

Side Story: Lakeside

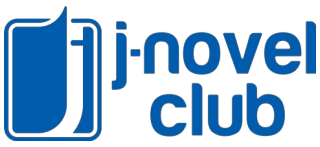
Afterword

Color Illustrations

Bonus Short Stories

About J-Novel Club

Copyright



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter
And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 2 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Hell Mode ~ The Hardcore Gamer Dominates in Another World with Garbage Balancing ~ Volume 1
by Hamuo
Translated by Taishi
Edited by Seanna Hundt
This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.
Copyright © 2020 Hamuo
Illustrations © 2020 Mo
Cover illustration by Mo
All rights reserved.
Original Japanese edition published in 2018 by Earth Star Entertainment
This English edition is published by arrangement with Earth Star Entertainment, Tokyo
English translation © 2021 J-Novel Club LLC
All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.
J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: October 2021
Premium E-Book